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Developers Create The Worlds, But We Live In Them



ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

Read my column or comment on this letter at gameinformer.com/mag or follow @GI_AndyMc

I get it. Being mean on the Internet is fun. People do it for the "lulz." The problem is, it isn't making life better, or in many cases making the game better. Games today are more than just their 1s and 0s. The people who play them are now an integral part of the experience.

Communities are now, more than ever, determining the staying power of a game. Yes, game developers need to make a great game. And yes, developers need to create tools so the community can police those that take enjoyment from spoiling the experience or degrading others in games. Even when all the checkboxes are in place from a developer standpoint, we, the players, still are responsible for making these worlds inhabitable.

Seeing players abuse one another in games is the thing that disappoints me most about this entertainment medium. I see it day after day in a range of activities – player after player just wants to AFK his or her way to victory, or people in chat rooms discourage others due to their race or sexual orientation. I want to believe gamers are the best of the best, but I encounter these poor behaviors far more than I care to admit.

Being awful in a game is bad enough, but the quest to find joy in the pain of others has led to real-world despicable behavior including denial of service attacks, "swatting" (where the lowest of the low send SWAT teams after players), bomb threats, the harassment of players with threats of bodily harm (a problem women in games in particular are facing far too often), and erasing another player's hard-earned content (read about this Destiny drama on pg. 24).

Games are a place and a time. We need to treat people like we would like to be treated. Awful people certainly exist in this world, but in games people use the shield of anonymity to do things they simply wouldn't do to people face to face. Yes, it is a problem all across the web, but I can turn off Twitter. I can ignore the comments on YouTube. But when you come into my games and make the world a horrible place, you are hitting me where I live. That simply isn't acceptable. Grow up, and let's make our game worlds places we all want to be.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,



visit gameinformer.com daily for the latest and greatest, and follow @gameinformer on Twitter

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Deus Ex: Mankind Divided

Adam Jensen is back in Deus Ex: Mankind Divided. The consipiracy runs deeper in this current gen-only sequel, and Eidos-Montreal is giving players the upgrades they'll need to successfully play every angle. ***by Ben Reeves***



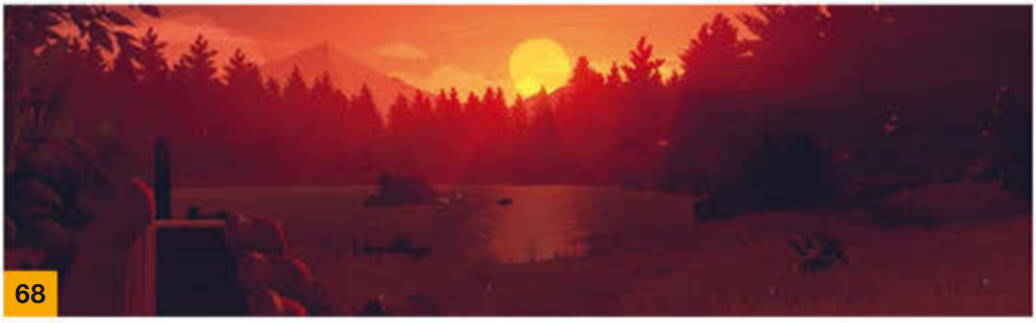
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» 8 Feedback
This month, readers complain there aren't enough pirate games, or at least point out there aren't enough good pirate games. Readers also talk about how hype for a game can affect opinion once you actually sit down and play, and commiserate about Rise of the Tomb Raider's Xbox One exclusivity.

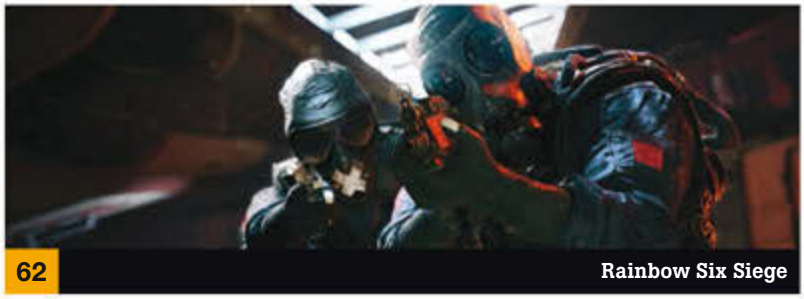
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We have our report from the recent Game Developer's Conference, and it's all about virtual reality. The industry's creative forces seem convinced it is the future. We also take a look at the history of Mortal Kombat's fatalities, and look at the cyberpunk movement and its effect on video games.

» 62 Previews
Final Fantasy XV is playable, at least in shortened demo form, and we have feedback from our all-too-brief experience. We also see how Jurassic Park works translated to Lego, find out what's next for Starcraft II, and try out Fable's take on free-to-play.

» 80 Reviews
We have a review this month for Dark Souls' new-gen debut, and we also have our review for the highly anticipated Dark Souls successor, Bloodborne. Additionally, we review the Metroid-inspired Axiom Verge and give Battlefield: Hardline a score.

» 100 Game Over
PlayStation 2 celebrated its 15th anniversary recently, marking a decade and a half since the release of one of the most successful home consoles ever unleashed. We take a look back at the PlayStation 2's legacy, analyzing its popularity and importance with numbers and fancy charts.

CORRECTION: The Mad Max cover story contained a couple errors. Scabrous Scrotus' center of power is Gastown, and Max is heading toward the Plains of Silence.

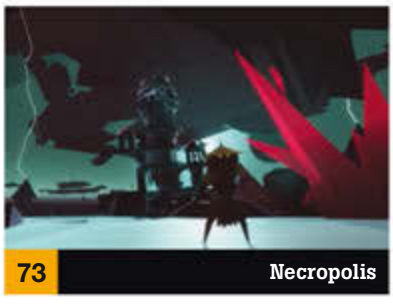

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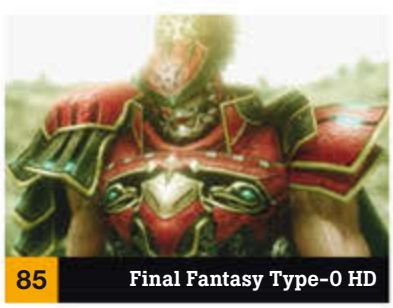

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Lara's Xbox exclusivity ruffles some feathers this month, while others were preoccupied with Batman, pirates, and battery chargers. One of those is a lot less cool than the others.

Taking Sides

I am a 41-year-old, happily married mother of five. I am also a gamer (which my husband loves). I have enjoyed many hours with my family playing and talking about games. However, I am a bit angry at the moment with the creators of one of my favorite series. I saw in your Rise of the Tomb Raider cover story (issue 263) that the game is only going to be on Xbox systems. Is this true? I have nothing against Xbox, but I don't own one and have no plans to buy an Xbox One or 360. I have been playing Tomb Raider since the beginning and am heartbroken to say the least if this is true. I have a very limited number of games I enjoy, and Lara Croft has always been my favorite – even after finding Skyrim, which I also adore.

Tina Welsh
via email

I am one of those fans hoping for Rise of the Tomb Raider to be released on PS3 or PS4. I have purchased every game since the beginning of the franchise. My PS2 and PS3 are still in beautiful condition (I gave my PS1 to a neighbor's son, and it's still in great condition too). It is aggravating to have to buy a new device every few years, and now I'm supposed to jump on the Xbox bandwagon? The game looks superb, but I guess I won't be playing it. I'm probably in the minority of gamers anyway, as I am female and in my 70s. I love the games and enjoy the Elder Scrolls as well. But, my Tomb Raiders appear to be at the end. I just can't afford the hundreds of dollars for another system.

Janice Schnack
via email

Microsoft's exclusivity deal for Rise of the Tomb Raider was a hot topic among Lara Croft fans this month, and few of them were happy about it; Crystal Dynamics' heroine clearly appeals to a wider audience than any one platform can support. While Crystal wouldn't comment further on Rise of the Tomb Raider's exclusivity, we do know that it's a timed deal, meaning Sony and PC fans may still have a shot at Lara's new adventure further down the road. For more on the game, check out gameinformer.com/rottr.

The Incomplete Package

I am writing about the New 3DS XL. When I was a kid, systems like Atari, Intellivision, and the NES all came with two controllers. The last few generations of consoles decided to maximize profits by only including one controller and charging 50-60 bucks for a second one. Now Nintendo has decided to ship the New 3DS XL without a charger. How is this okay? A company selling a product without all the parts needed to make it function is a new low in terms of tackiness. I don't care that it costs a mere 10 dollars, or that they assume the vast majority of consumers "probably" already have one! It's a crappy business practice, and it's really disgusting of Nintendo to do. How far is this practice going to go?

Tom Owens
via email

Hardware manufacturers are always looking for ways to keep the final price of a new device down, but cutting out the charger – a required component for operating the new handheld – does seem beyond the pale. Perhaps Nintendo could mold the charger to look like one of its beloved characters. That way, Nintendo fans would have no problem shelling out extra cash for them, and unlike the company's useless Amiibo figurines, it would actually do something.



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No Hype Zone

Does it seem like hype for a game tarnishes people's opinions of the final product? Take Titanfall and Destiny, for example. Titanfall cleaned up E3 awards in 2013 and was believed to be the shooter that would beat Call of Duty. When it released, it was a good game and got high scores, but it wasn't the CoD-killer it was expected to be, and I saw that game get a lot of flak. People were also excited for Bungie's first post-Halo project, and why shouldn't they be? Halo is an amazing series. While Destiny has its problems, such as excessive grinding and a rocky storyline, it seems that a big reason people hate Destiny is because it wasn't some revolutionary RPG-shooter-MMO they thought it would be. I think if these games released without any details or promises released beforehand, public opinion for them would be higher than they are.

Gavin Gagna
via email

It's easy to let your excitement for a game get the best of you, which can indeed color your opinion. You should always approach hype with a healthy amount of skepticism. The hate received by games like Titanfall and Destiny are the other side of the same coin – it's just as intoxicating to jump on the bandwagon and label something the worst thing ever after expecting it to be the best thing ever. The good news is you don't have to completely abstain from video game news and previews to avoid both extremes of the spectrum; just use a little common sense and you'll be fine.





A Pirate's Life For Me

I'm late to the party as far as Assassin's Creed goes, but I have a pressing concern. I got Black Flag a few months ago and I was completely blown away by how fun it is. The graphics are amazing, the gameplay is excellent, and the ability to live out my childhood fantasy of being a "real" pirate (no parrots) was exactly what I needed. I loved almost everything about the game, from the shanties to the treasure hunting. The only thing I didn't like was getting pulled from the high seas to plunder some office in the present day. In short, they should take Assassin's Creed out of Black Flag! My question is can I look forward to any other kind of open-world pirate game with similar features to Black Flag?

Douglas Lahey
Iowa

We'd love to tell you that someone is working on an awesome open-world pirate game, but unfortunately there is no justice in this world. Your best bet for more naval warfare would be Assassin's Creed Rogue, except that it is not particularly pirate-y, and is more Assassin's Creed. Hopefully, someday our dreams of a standalone swashbuckling adventure will be answered; in the meantime, we suggest you rethink your irrational hatred of parrots – they're a pirate's best friend!

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Do you know of any site where I can find a list of all game developers/publishers?"

Yes: www.google.com.

"Did you guys notice that you're taste in video gamings sucks? Seriously."

No, but we did notice your grammar sucks. Seriously.

"Glad to see Lara is rising again in your last issue. Will there be a cheat code to allow you to play her in the nude?"

We're guessing you haven't reached puberty yet. Actually, we're praying.

Reader Gibberish:

"Open Vacancy for Good and experience mining and exploration activities in the oil and gas"

Question Of The Month:

What's your favorite in-game vehicle and why?

gi spy





(Left) This month, the crew at Eidos Montreal invited us into the studio to learn all about the next installment of Deus Ex. We didn't even have to use our Interrogate cyber augmentation. **(Right)** Capy's Nathan Vella, Vambleer's Rami Ismail, and fighting-game guru Seth Killian looked mighty dapper at this year's DICE conference.

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

GI SPY

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On Your Mind

- Gaming's Biggest Sad Sacks
- "Yay For More Tomb Raider!"
- "Boo For Tomb Raider Exclusivity!"
- Sacred Cow Barbecue Love
- Spring Gaming Excitement



Gaming's Lovable Losers

In issue 263, we asked readers who the unluckiest character in gaming is. Mario's ongoing haplessness landed him at the top of the list, a few other big stars received commiserative shout-outs as well. Here are some responses.

Mario is the unluckiest video game character on Earth. He's either woefully misinformed of his duties as a plumber or he has the worst union contract in the history of ever.

Seumas Irving

Leon S. Kennedy is hands-down the unluckiest character ever. Congratulations on becoming a S.T.A.R.S. member: Your first assignment is to stop the apocalypse. Hope you enjoy the Secret Service – now rescue the president's daughter from Las Plagas. New console, new game, biggest obstacle yet; your magnificent bangs won't save you from RE 6. Sorry, Mr. Kennedy, maybe next time.

Joseph Pogue

Sonic easily takes the cake here. In addition to facing the usual villains within his games, he's often undermined from external enemies like Big Red Button. In a way he's kind of like the Nicolas Cage of gaming.

Hayden Szepkouski

Unluckiest video game character? Leisure Suit Larry, 'nuff said.

Bill Todd



Happy New Year

I considered 2014 a lackluster year for the new consoles; after a near-unanimous vote of Game of the Year for The Last of Us in 2013, every game considered for the award in 2014 had considerable warts. Enter your What's Next article in issue 263, detailing upcoming games for 2015. On every page there were games coming out for PS4, including many exclusives and timed exclusives. Considering that I purchased a PS4 based on the potential of No Man's Sky, reading your list of games coming out this year only cements in my mind that the PS4 is the place for me to find the best games. Thank you for your great work!

Mark Harris
Amarillo, TX

We're glad you're enjoying your new system, Mark, but 2015 isn't just looking up for Sony. Plenty of promising titles are coming to PC and Xbox One as well this year, starting with the Microsoft exclusive Ori and the Blind Forest. Check our glowing review on page 83 for more details.

Holy Remasters, Batman!

I'm a big fan of the Batman Arkham games, and I was just wondering if you could use your connections to get Rocksteady and Warner Bros. to port (or even remaster!) the first three games for the current-gen consoles. I had to sell my 360 to save up money for an Xbox One and Arkham Knight, and I would really like to relive all the fun I had. Could you please make it happen?

Susan Murphy
via email

You drastically overestimate the influence we have, Susan, but as always, if Warner Bros. does decide to remaster the original trilogy at some point, we'll be more than happy to take credit for their decision.





(Left) Respawn community manager Abbie Heppe, Fortyseven Communications CEO Sibel Sunar, and GDC general manager Meggan Scavio were representing at DICE.
(Right) This year at GDC, Kim caught up with Final Fantasy XIV director Naoki Yoshida at GDC to find out once and for all what the heck a "Heavensward" is. We still don't know.

GI SPY

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NETFLIX
A NETFLIX ORIGINAL SERIES
MARVEL
DAREDEVIL
TV MA
ALL EPISODES
April 10

gallery

WINNER

1 Aleisa
Even Half-Life's head crabs deserve blue ribbons for their beauty.

2 Megan Lewis
A horror game with a psychopathic Link on the loose isn't a bad idea, is it?

3 Tracarris Wince
From left to right: Relevant. Relevant. Could disappear forever and no one would notice. Relevant? Relevant.

4 Zach Raw
A beautiful Assassin's Creed III piece that gets every detail right, like both trees looking exactly the same.









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(Left) At PAX East, Dan got the lowdown on Hearthstone's new Blackrock Mountain adventure from Blizzard's Christina Sims, Eric Dodds, Lyndsi Achucarro, and Yong Woo.
(Right) We always suspected the players yelling at us in Call of Duty matches were kids, but we now have (adorable) photographic evidence thanks to readers Jason and Crystal Burkhardt. Well played, baby Axton!





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VIRTUAL REALITY CHECK

Game Informer analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of the latest VR prototypes

by Matt Bertz

After years of prototypes, hype, and venture capital investments, we're finally nearing the moment when virtual reality transitions from a developer dream to a retail reality. The Game Developers Conference served as the latest platform for manufacturers to showcase cutting-edge prototypes, introduce new VR demos, and finally commit to launch windows.

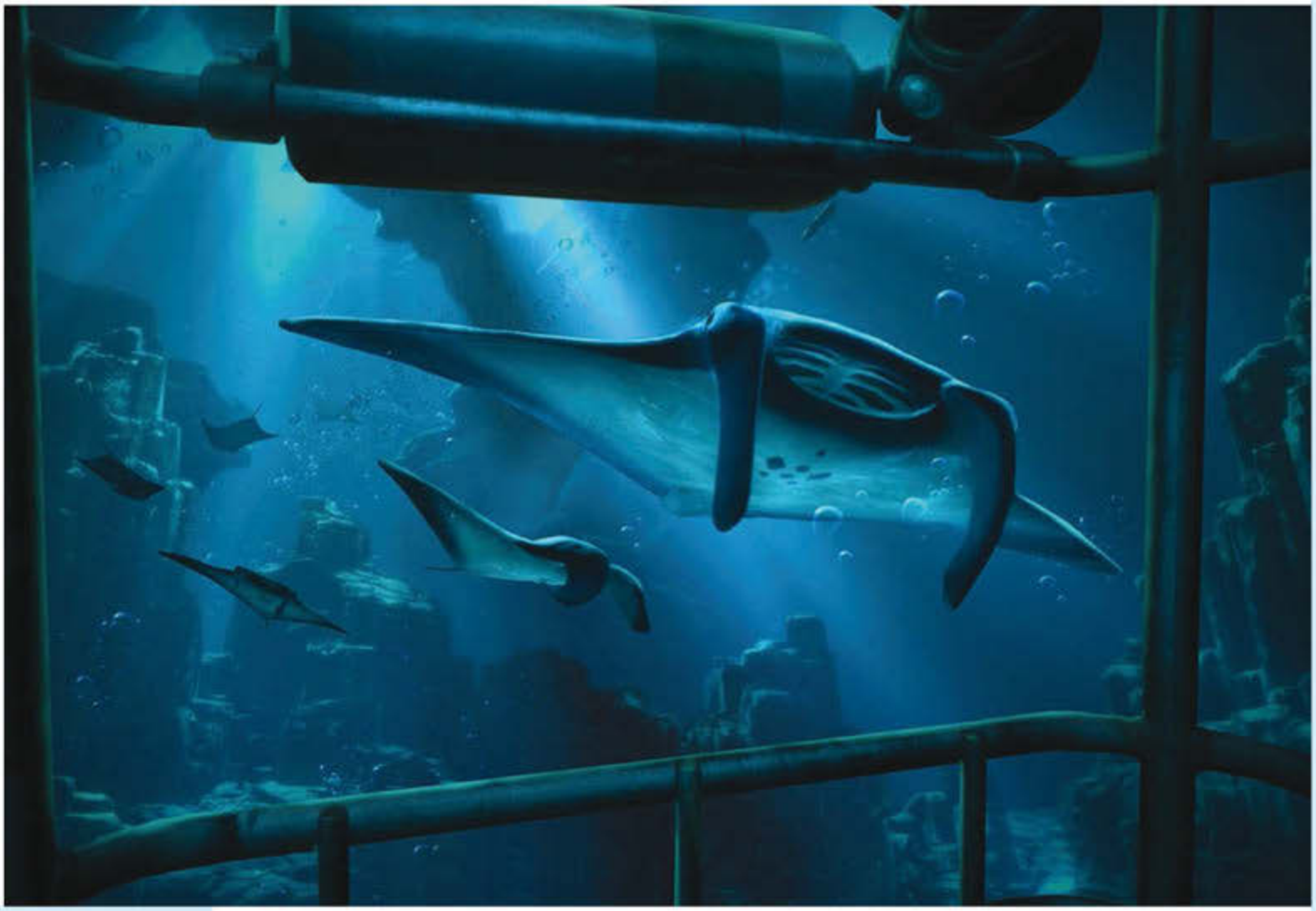
The biggest realization we had after trying the latest prototypes from Oculus, Sony, and HTC/Valve is how much this technology has improved since John Carmack showed off a Rift demo of Doom 3 at E3 in 2012. That shaky demo didn't look particularly great, and many people left the experience feeling nauseated. After sitting through countless previews and pitches with multiple headsets over the course of GDC, I didn't have one instance where I walked away feeling queasy, and the graphical fidelity has improved drastically. The tech may need a few more tweaks to be ready for release, namely in form factor, but the power under the hood has reached a tipping point at which you can simply enjoy the feeling of presence in the virtual reality experience.

"The only barriers to doing [VR] perfectly are the latency of the hardware, and the resolution of the screen and the quality of the objects, and all these human engineering parameters that will be improved over time," says Epic Games founder Tim Sweeney. "I think we will be at a point where in 10 years the quality of the hardware and the polish it has achieved will be so high that it will be genuinely indistinguishable from reality."

That promise has everyone from professional sports leagues and Hollywood to tourism officials and game developers drooling at the possibilities this technology will enable. By the end of the decade we may see professional quarterbacks practice reading defenses with VR, movies that put you right in the middle of the action, historical recreations that allow you to see what the ancient Roman ruins looked like when the Empire was in its prime, and, of course, games that bring you closer to the action than ever before.

"VR is really a different way of looking at the world," Sweeney says. "I think it is going to be a completely new medium for storytelling that is going to span games and traditional movies and everything else. It lets us experience those things in an entirely new way. The other incredible thing about VR is the feeling that it is actually you. When you can look down and see your hands and see them responding to your movement, you really feel like it's your body and you have this physical attachment to the hand that you see moving around in VR. That's going to be a major area of innovation, it's going to really change the way we are going to think about computers entirely."

The excitement continues to ramp for VR, but for most consumers it still sounds like a fantasy. Given the previous failures in the field, many approach it with a skeptical eye. You truly have to experience it to understand its power, but in the absence of getting each of you a developer kit we wanted to share our thoughts on where each of the primary offerings stand and discuss the potential pitfalls that still exist in keeping the tech from mainstream adoption.



PROJECT MORPHEUS

One year removed from its emergence, Sony's VR solution for the PlayStation 4 has come a long way. The company's engineers have been busy over the past 12 months, improving the tech in several critical ways and also refining the headset design.

The recent prototype unveiled at GDC sports a new 5.7-inch OLED display capable of outputting 1080p images at 120 frames per second. By adding three more LEDs to the headset exterior, the engineers improved the head tracking to a full 360 degrees.

The technical jargon of these improvements may be lost on some, but after putting the headset on I can confirm there is a substantial improvement over the previous design. Whether I was coming face to face with a great white shark under the ocean or peering into a dollhouse filled with adorable robots going about their daily business, I truly felt present in the moments. The headset was also more comfortable to wear.

Most of the different headsets on display at GDC still look like prototypes, but the sleek new Project Morpheus model looks ready for store shelves. A single-band design makes it easy to put the headset on, and adjusting the fit is as simple as clicking a button on the back of the unit. The new design shifts the weight to the top of your head, so the goggles don't feel so unwieldy. Perhaps the best design decision was giving players a way to move the visual panel away from their faces at the click of a button. This feature is critical to allowing a player to take a drink, answer a phone call, or locate a controller without having to remove the entire headset.

Sony has opted against integrating audio into the headset, which means players will need their own audio solution to have the true VR experience. The demos on display at the show used either the DualShock 4 or Move controllers, which leads us to wonder whether Sony plans to offer different bundles to players.

Look for Project Morpheus to release in the first half of 2016, with some of the game lineup being revealed at E3 in June. One critical element to the launch still hasn't been revealed – price.

"The most important thing for us was to develop the personal experience, so we wouldn't compromise that to hit a certain price point," says Sony president of worldwide studios Shuhei Yoshida. "So now we have done that, the challenge is how to bring it to the lowest price point possible for us."





HTC VIVE

After years of hearing developers speak in whispers about Valve's amazing virtual reality tech, we finally got to see it for ourselves at GDC in a behind-closed-door demonstration.

A few days before our appointment, Valve and HTC announced a partnership to create the Vive, a new virtual reality headset powered by SteamVR. This headset features two 1200 x 1080 displays, 90 frames per second refresh rates, and 360 degree tracking.

The vast majority of VR demos I've experienced to this point have involved a headset, a chair, and a controller. Valve's is considerably more complicated. Two small base stations positioned on the top of shelves in the corners of the room are set up to track the player location with laser sensors. The headset isn't considerably different feeling than the Rift, with straps that hold the goggles in place on your face.

The player uses two wand-like controllers that are currently tethered to the Vive with cords. I had to wear a belt that keeps the cords from tripping me up, but Valve says the final retail model will be wireless. The laser sensors track the position of each controller as well, which means developers can render the wands into the virtual reality experience. Rather than fumble blindly for the controllers when the headset is on, I could look down and locate them as the person running the demo walked them over to me.

The Vive demo took place in a wide room to allow some freedom of movement. Using the base stations, the SteamVR technology allows developers to use a 15 x 15-foot space in gameplay. Valve ensures the player doesn't run into walls while on the move with a clever technology that creates a virtual barrier that appears if you move too far in any direction. The user can modify these boundaries to accommodate a variety of rooms.

Being able to move during the VR demos helped deepen the feeling of being present in the various experiences. Standing on the deck of a shipwreck at the bottom of the ocean, I was able to walk up to the railings, giving me a closer view at the towering blue whale swimming past. The Google Earth demo positioned me directly on top of a city, allowing me to walk over to different districts and lean down to get a closer view of the street. This technology could be a game changer for titles like SimCity or Populous.

HTC plans to release the Vive by the end of the year, but as with the Morpheus, we have no idea how much it will cost.

NEW VR EXPERIENCES ON THE HORIZON

While the technology is coming into focus, we still know next to nothing about the game libraries for Project Morpheus, Oculus Rift, or Vive. Here are a few of the demos that caught our eye at GDC. Though they may not all be games in development, we hope they end up there.

› Aperture Science Test Facility

The Valve demo that takes place in the Portal universe was the best VR experience we had at GDC. The demo places you in the role of a robot repairman at the Aperture Science test facility. Filled with the series' signature humor, it walks the player though the humbling experience of trying to repair an Atlas.

When the malfunctioning robot walked into the room I felt it was really in the same space I was inhabiting, moving to the side to let it come into the repair bay. My attempts at repairing the Atlas proved fruitless, which earned me a scolding from none other than GLaDOS herself. As the floor tiles of the room fell away and GLaDOS appeared above, I took a moment away from worrying about my pending doom to soak in just how cool it was to be standing in this universe.

Valve was quick to point out that this is only a demo, not a slice of a larger game, but we're having a hard time thinking of a more alluring Vive launch game than a Portal spin-off. I'd love to see how the studio could extrapolate this into a full experience.

› Time Machine

A fan of virtual reality since the early years of the tech, Minority creative director Vander Caballero is following up the tearjerker Papo & Yo with a very different project for Oculus Rift. Written in collaboration with Sekret Agent Productions' Corey May (Assassin's Creed), Time Machine transports players back in time to come eye-to-eye with some of the biggest and most dangerous prehistotic underwater beasts that ever lived. Players are not there to hunt these massive beasts, but to watch and learn more about their physiology than paleontologists can glean from fossils.

Players must use scanners, trackers, and other devices to collect information, being careful to avoid being a prehistoric snack in the process. Trying to dodge the sharp-toothed snap of a pliosaurus is a heart-pounding affair made all the more exciting in VR.

› London Heist

The star demo of the Project Morpheus event was this London Studio production that calls to mind The Getaway. The demo begins with the player being tied to a chair. The muscle-bound thug who put you there is taunting you with a blowtorch, waving it too close for comfort by your crotch, blowing smoke in your face, and flicking his cigarette in your eye.

The demo eventually transitions to a flashback heist sequence where you must use two Move controllers to interact with a desk to grab a lime-sized diamond and a handgun, which you inevitably use in a gunfight seconds after you lift the prize. Crouching in real life to hide behind the desk, you must use one Move controller to line up shots and take down enemies while you supply new magazines for the gun with the other hand. This light-gun style VR experience proves that developers can apply the technology to more traditional triple-A games.



THE VIRTUAL GAUNTLET

If manufacturers want to bring virtual reality to the mainstream, these potential pitfalls must be addressed.

› The Living Room Dilemma

Microsoft's Kinect sold well out of the gate, but many users eventually realized they didn't have the proper lighting or enough space in their living room for the tech to work properly. This could also be an inhibitor to mainstream adoption of virtual reality, as several demos we've seen allow the player to move around a virtual space. This could prove impossible for those who live in smaller, urban apartments or have cluttered living spaces.

Sony realizes this may be a problem for some, but it isn't deterring them from bringing the technology to market. "There are certain situations like houses in Japan for example, there are certain physical size limitations," says Sony president of worldwide studios Shuhei Yoshida. "Especially if you are single and young, your income is limited, you live in a small apartment, and I could see that could be a potential problem. But the VR doesn't require that much space. In terms of if people would be willing to move their furniture and sofas, if they experience is so compelling, I think they would be willing to do that. I think the most crucial factor is how compelling the experience is."

› A Solitary Experience

Over the past 10 years gaming has gotten more inclusive with the creation of motion controls, adoption of tablet devices, and increase in online gaming. Virtual reality runs counter to that by isolating the player in a headset and headphones.

Though his company is bullish on the technology and offers Rift support for Elite: Dangerous, Frontier founder David Braben realizes this could be an inhibitor to adoption. "When I'm playing Oculus and I've got headphones on as well and I hear my phone ring, I go 'Oh no,'" he says. "There's that whole side of the thing. I'm sure seeing our kids play with Oculus, that's even more...they're already remote enough when they are playing a game and very focused. So I think those are issues that the industry has to think about."

Some are already looking at ways to bring more players into the fold. Sony, for one, has experimented with connecting Project Morpheus users for online play and also explored ways to involve more people in couch play.

"There's also the social screen where other people can see what you're doing, so it's not just that they're cut off and there's this one person who gets in on the experience," says Sony senior researcher Richard Marks. "They actually can see this kind of thing from their screens."

Yoshida says some of his teams are trying to design games so another person can participate without needing to wear a headset as well. "Something similar to what Nintendo has done with the Wii U," Yoshida says. "One person has the large controller, the other has the other controller, looking at the TV. I think that works really well with VR."

› Real-World Dangers

When a player puts on a virtual reality headset and headphones, they are essentially in sensory deprivation, cut off from whatever happens in the living room. This could prove to be a brilliant source of practical jokes, but it also carries some real-world dangers.

What's to prevent a pet from lying down in front of the person with the headset on? It will only take a matter of weeks before we likely start hearing tales of players falling over and hurting themselves or not hearing a fire alarm until it's too late because they were so immersed in a VR experience.

Another safety scenario that needs monitoring is emotionally charged experiences for the faint of heart. The sense of presence that these new headsets deliver is remarkable, which means someone could be susceptible to a heart attack when a shark rips through a diving tank and lunges at the player or Smaug charges toward a player breathing fire. You can be sure lawyers for each of the VR headset manufacturers are seriously considering these scenarios and writing user agreements that protect the companies from legal blowback should something go awry during a VR experience.

› Keeping Your Lunch Down

As the virtual reality technology has improved over the last two years, my personal experiences with nausea have all but dissipated. This is largely due to the aggressive leaps in technology, as well as developers getting a better understanding of what types of experiences could make a player lose their stomach. But even with the tech minimizing the barf factor, those who get motion sickness in real life will probably be susceptible to the same sensation, dubbed "simulation sickness," in virtual reality.

"That can be a killer," Braben says. "We've learned such a lot about what things give you nausea and what don't in terms of how to do it, and it's not just a matter of framerate/resolution. It's also how you process the head tracking and that sort of thing. There are a lot of things like that that are quite subtle that are a product of time."

Sony thinks these concerns are blown out of proportion. "We can make it safe for 100 percent of people," Yoshida says. "Some people just cannot try a roller coaster, or something similar. But we are trying our best to minimize."

› Cutting the Cord

Each of the headsets delivers large amounts of data to the PC or console, so all three are designed to use a cord to relay the information. This may not be a big deal, but when you are totally present in a virtual experience and then you feel the awkward cord brush against your shoulder or back, it can take you out right out of the moment. At this juncture there is no way around a corded experience.

› At What Cost?

With the release windows locked down for both the Vive and Project Morpheus, it's only a matter of time before we learn how much these headsets will cost consumers. Given the high-end technology built into these machines, we don't expect the headsets to be affordable, but a high sticker price could slow adoption.

Many of the headsets require other technology to work, which could also drive the price upward. Project Morpheus needs the PlayStation Camera to work most effectively, and some games are designed for use with Move controllers. HTC's Vive may end up being the most expensive of the options, considering players need to purchase the headset, two tracking stations, and two wireless controllers.

Many players on the PC may face hidden costs as well. If the headsets require high-end graphics processing, many may need to upgrade their rigs considerably.

OCULUS RIFT

After a large media presence at CES this past January, Oculus took a lower profile at GDC, taking no press appointments. Though we may not have had face time with Facebook's $2 billion acquisition, several booths featured Crescent Bay, the latest iteration of the headset.

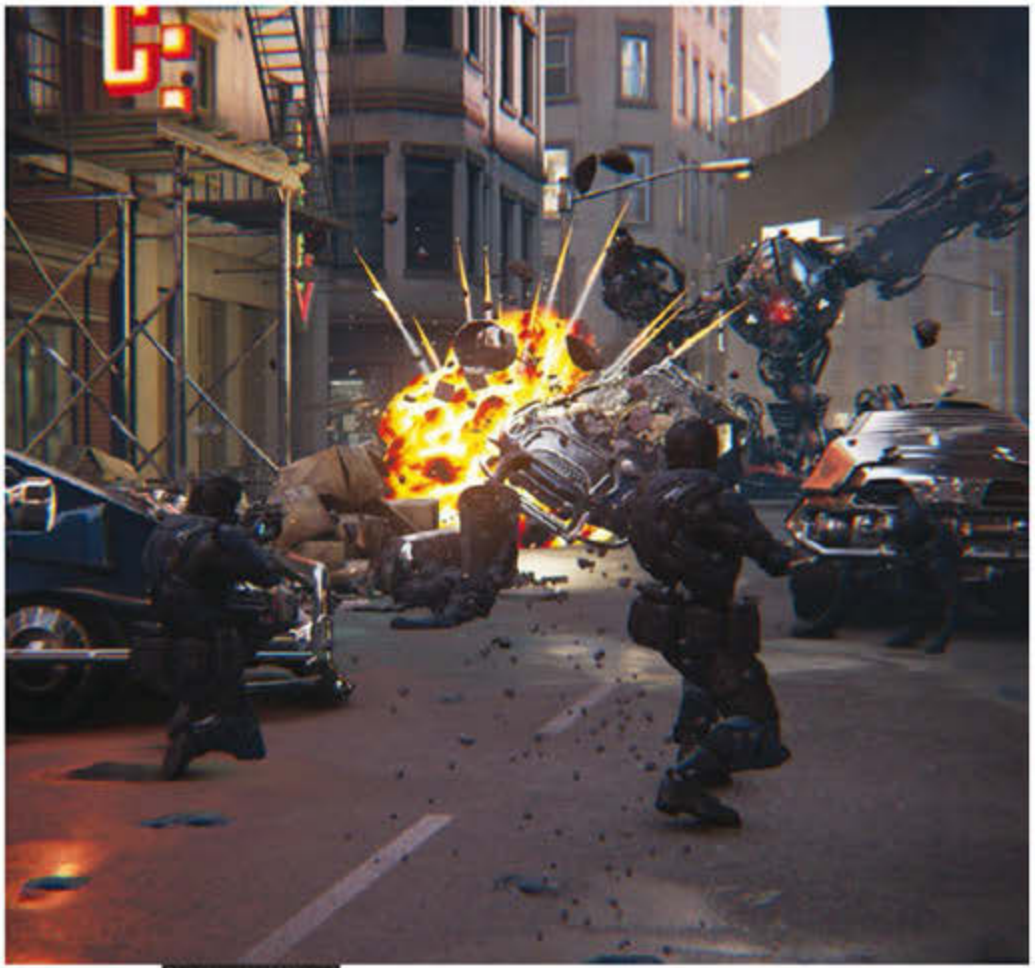
Oculus hasn't publicly shared the technical specs of Crescent Bay, but the performance is on par with the other two headsets we tried at GDC. Some demos were set up with a 5x5-foot rubber mat, which means the head tracking is improved to the stage where, like Valve, they are testing player movement within game experiences.

Two demos at the Epic Games booth took advantage of this newfound movement. The Epic-produced "Showdown" demo places players in the thick of a shootout between a huge mech and a team of near-future soldiers. The player is on a conveyor belt of sorts, moving slowly toward the menacing mech, dodging incoming ordinance and the shrapnel flying through the environment after explosions.

Designed by Weta Digital, the "Thief in the Shadows" demo places you in the gold-filled chambers of Smaug, the fearsome dragon from The Hobbit. The demo begins with a low rumble as the dragon rises from its bed of golden coins, spreads its wings, and starts to circle your position. The impressive sense of scale makes you feel vulnerable and insignificant, and you can't help but wince when he inevitably rains fire down upon you.

The Crescent Bay headset is lighter and more comfortable than the previous models, and it now features integrated headphones with 3D positional audio that developers can access while programming. This is the only model we've used that opts for audio integration rather than requiring an additional headset.

Oculus still hasn't committed to an input device, release window, or price, but with both of the other major contenders laying out their timelines, we wouldn't be surprised to see the company address this at E3.







The Brutal History Of

MORTAL KOMBAT'S FATALITIES

Since its inception, Mortal Kombat has carried with it a sense of brutality. Seeing its share of controversy and censorship, the franchise has always been associated with video game violence, but one segment of its formula stands out as the most bombastic and iconic: the fatality.

by Brian Shea

Serving as the way to put an exclamation point on a victory, fatalities take Mortal Kombat's trademark blood and gore and crank it to the next level: seeing the defeated character executed as if a gladiator in the arena. The "Finish Him!" command given to players prior to the window to perform a fatality has become synonymous with the series itself.

As series co-creator Ed Boon tells us, however, the franchise's signature finishing moves were inspired by another series. "We didn't have fatalities in mind when we started the first Mortal Kombat game," he says. "Oddly, the idea for fatalities came from the dizzy feature that was in another popular fighting game. [Boon wouldn't specify, but likely means Capcom's pioneering Street Fighter series – *Ed*.] I personally loved getting my opponent dizzy because it was really fun getting a free hit that you knew they couldn't block."

Though Boon loved being able to land an unblockable attack, he was less fond of it happening in the middle of a match. "I hated it when someone would get me dizzy, because I knew there was nothing I could do and I had to just sit there and take my punishment," he says. "So, we decided to move that portion of the game to the end of the match, where the winner was already determined. That's why the loser goes into a 'dizzy' animation and the winner gets a free hit at the end. We had that in the game for quite some time when we just thought 'Wouldn't it be cool if you could do something really devastating to the other guy as the final blow?' That's how fatalities were born."

Originally, the idea was only going to be applied to Shang Tsung. The final boss was set to decapitate those who fell to him, but series co-creators Ed Boon and John Tobias decided that it would be better if players could perform these life-ending actions themselves.

Despite the cool factor of the fatalities, the team decided to keep their existence more of a secret than other parts of the game. "We purposefully didn't document how to execute the move, which would add another layer of mystery and intrigue to it," Boon says. "People would have to discover and share how to perform them. This was part of the magic of fatalities. They were exciting, cool, over-the-top, and most people didn't know how to execute them."

The decision not to document the moves seemed to worry Tobias. "At the time, we thought these button and joystick combinations were going to be so hard that nobody would ever figure them out," he said in Steven L. Kent's *The Ultimate History Video Games*.

Once the idea for fatalities was in place, the team needed to design these punishing finishing moves for each character. Through much of the series' history, character fatalities were drawn out by Boon as stick figures using pen and paper. Though that creative process has remained similar at its heart – now Boon uses a tablet that allows him to drag and reposition his drawn stick figures – the rest of the process has matured alongside the series.

"The first Mortal Kombat game only had seven characters, so it only had seven fatalities," Boon explains. "We weren't sure exactly what we had, so there was no official process of making them at the time. It was pretty much somebody coming up with an idea and then, if we liked it, we started putting it into the game. A very unofficial process."

Fatalities have continued to one-up those that came before them. With each successive entry, Boon and his team work to make the fatalities more involved and creative. This is evident in the newest entry in the franchise, Mortal Kombat X.

"They are much more elaborate now, last longer, and involve a much bigger production to create," Boon says. "Because there are so many, the ideas come from numerous people on the team. You never know what crazy sequence some random team member might come up with. We don't care where the idea comes from as long as it's unique, entertaining, and will get a big reaction out of players."

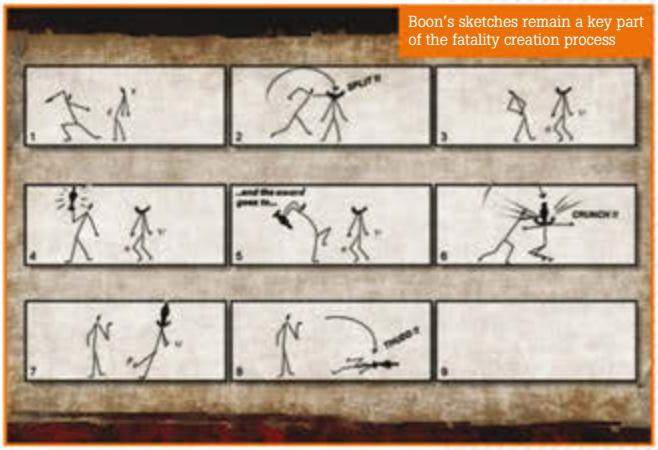
Sometimes, in the search to get that big reaction, members of the development team get a bit carried away. Even though the series has obtained some of its fame through the blood its warriors spill, fatality pitch meetings can go too far.

"We have fatality meetings and people come in with sketches or ideas and they'll stand up and act it out," Boon told us in 2010. "Somebody will say something dealing with parts of the body that you just don't want to mutilate, and we'll say, 'Come on, you guys! We can't do better than this?' We want to be creative with it instead of just blatantly shocking."

"For the most part, all of us try to come up with the most ridiculous things that we can," designer Derek Kirtzic says. "In the board room, if one of us seems to cringe at another person's idea, that's usually where we figure the line is. Also, we want to make sure things work in beats. We could have a great idea, but we need to have like three beats to each one of the fatalities to help sell it."

Kreate-A-Fatality

In Mortal Kombat: Armageddon, Midway included the option to replace a character's normal fatality with an improvised one driven by button combos. Every input extends the fatality by a new move, but each successive window to input button commands is shorter than the last. The feature did not appear in any games outside of Armageddon.



Boon's sketches remain a key part of the fatality creation process



Reptile's ability to spit acid comes in handy with his Mortal Kombat X finisher





Mortal Kombat co-creator Ed Boon

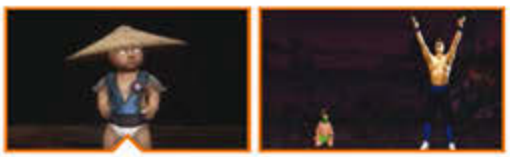
Diversity In Death

The popularity of fatalities in the first game drove the team to expand the concept in subsequent entries. In 2011, Boon told us that he felt the different kinds of "-alities" got out of control. "It became this expectation of 'what kind of -alities are we gonna add to every single one?' That just became such a distraction from the normal fighting that we figured that we obviously can't add an -ality to every single fight."

Check out the different kinds of finishing moves the team has experimented with over the years:



Animality - The idea of animalities came from fans that spread false rumors about different kinds of finishing moves in the Mortal Kombat games. The team liked the idea of the winning character turning into an animal to kill their opponent and decided to put animalities in Mortal Kombat 3. Animalities were removed from the series due to the difficulty of animating the transformations using the 3D models that started in Mortal Kombat 4.



Babality - Babalities' inspiration came from sound programmer Dan "Toasty" Forden, who thought it would be a funny addition. The move sees the victor turning his or her opponent into an infant decked out in miniature versions of their normal clothes. Babalities disappeared after 1996's Mortal Kombat Trilogy, but returned in 2011's Mortal Kombat reboot.



Brutality - Brutalities, which first appeared in console versions of Ultimate Mortal Kombat 3, gave players the option of performing an extra-long button combination instead of a traditional fatality. Though the high difficulty and low payoff made the moveset largely disappear from the franchise shortly after its debut, a revamped version of the brutality returns in Mortal Kombat X.



Friendship - In response to the controversy surrounding the fatalities in the first Mortal Kombat, Midway gave players the ability to perform acts of kindness and humorous movements instead of the normal killing blow in Mortal Kombat II. For instance, Kung Lao pulls a bunny out of his hat, Shang Tsung presents a rainbow, and Liu Kang dances.



Hara-Kiri - In Mortal Kombat: Deception, Hara-Kiri moves allowed defeated characters to take their own lives rather than suffering at the hands of their opponents. The moves were implemented to create a race-like mechanic to see which player could perform their finishing move first.



Ermac's fatality in Mortal Kombat X is so graphic that we'll just let you imagine where he takes it from this point

This transition to having a more rhythmic approach wasn't anything the Mortal Kombat team consciously gravitated toward, but looking at how the moves have evolved since the first game, it's become an obvious design motif. The "three beat" formula to creating a fatality is now used by some as a loose guide when thinking up new ways for characters to dismember their foes.

"Cassie Cage's bubble gum fatality [in Mortal Kombat X] is a good example," Kirtzic says. "The first beat is her shooting them in the leg, the second beat is shooting them in the head, and the third beat is putting the bubble gum into the head. It's just making sure we follow a good sequence and there's always a good laugh or two that follows with them."

"Now that we have so many characters with multiple fatalities, the process of creating them is a much bigger task," Boon explains. "Now, they are put together by combining two or three big moments into one action that seems to flow or make sense. The main ingredient is that those events are something that are over-the-top and provide some amount of entertainment or shock."





A Return To Bloody Form

Following the series' 3D trilogy, which consists of Deadly Alliance, Deception, and Armageddon, Midway teamed with DC Comics to release the tamer Mortal Kombat vs. DC Universe, one of the few entries in the series to earn the ESRB's "T" rating.

Prior to that, however, Boon told us he was looking at rebooting the series with a grittier look inspired by the Gears of War franchise. "To me, when I saw Gears of War, I was like, 'Holy s---! That's the look that we've been talking about.' Visually, that's what we want to do," he told us in 2007.

Though MK vs. DCU came out in its place, Boon got his wish in 2011, when the newly formed NetherRealm Studios returned Mortal Kombat to its bloody roots. The title not only rebooted the story, but changed the visual style, returned the fight mechanics to 2D, and took fatalities to the next level.

"While we were making [Mortal Kombat vs. DC Universe], we knew we were gonna go back to an M-rated game. We were gonna go back to the 2D fighting plane and revisit the older story. That whole plan was already in place," Boon told us in 2011.

Mortal Kombat 9, as it came to be known to fans, also introduced a new, brutal kind of attack: the X-ray attack. These new, devastating in-match attacks are only usable when a player fills up their special meter, but they bring a level of punishment that is outshined only by the fatality.



In the early '90s, blood flying from a freshly punched fighter was enough to shock some and, when combined with the over-the-top nature of the fatalities, Mortal Kombat became a controversial title in the young video game industry. Though games like Mortal Kombat and Night Trap are tame by today's standards, these titles resulted in congressional hearings that eventually led to the founding of the video game ratings board, the ESRB.

Despite knowing that this could negatively impact violent games like his, Boon was glad the industry was taking action. "Part of us kind of realized that it was something that was becoming necessary because graphics were becoming a little bit more realistic," he told us in 2010. "All of a sudden you could depict violence and blood and all that. I remember when people were playing the game in the arcades, I was thinking, 'Wow, this is really a violent game, and young kids can just walk into the arcade and play it.' There was something that seemed kind of wrong about that."

Though the rating system spawned from fatalities had a serious impact on the industry, Boon insists the moves were not meant to be taken as such. "Fatalities were never intended to have a serious tone," he explains. "We just wanted to show a big spectacle that would shock and entertain the player."

The fatality has grown and changed over the course of the series' run, but the core concept remains the same: delivering a satisfying end to a hard-fought battle.









Ripped From The Headlines:

The Twisted Tale Of Deleted Destiny Data

by Michael Futter

There are some things gamers can universally identify as excruciating. A console dying right when you bring home an anticipated game stings. The power going out in that spot between beating a boss and saving your game hurts. Having your MMO characters and all of their gear destroyed is devastating.

The latter of these is where our story begins, and where we thought it would likely end when we were made aware of it on February 19. It all began with an 11-year-old boy named Henry, youthful naïveté, and an act of pure maliciousness that touched not only the child, but an entire New England family.

On February 13, Henry was playing Destiny online with friends when he encountered a user that offered to help the boy cheat his way from level 31 to the current maximum of 32. There is no such glitch or exploit, but the other user convinced the child to turn on the PlayStation 4's Share Play feature and then virtually hand over the controller.

What followed was a heartbreaking few minutes of Henry watching his two higher-level characters deleted and then his final exotic weapon scrapped. After politely and bravely confronting his aggressors, the video closes with Henry sobbing.

Bungie later shared the video as we worked to confirm its authenticity as more than a prank. When Henry's mother reached out to us the following day, she told us that she posted it on her YouTube channel only to make Bungie aware and, as a result, had received disturbing messages questioning her parenting skills, why she let her 11-year-old play Destiny, and why her son was trying to cheat.

We thought the story would come to a close there. We had reached out to the account responsible for deleting the data and received no response.

Two days later, the story took a very strange turn. We received an email from a woman claiming to be the mother of the person who owns the account that deleted Henry's data, who we'll call "Adam" to protect his identity. At the time of our conversation, Adam had received hundreds of harassing and threatening messages as a result of Henry's video.

We were told a confusing tale that seemed farfetched at best and fantastical at worst. Adam was involved in a head-on collision on November 1, 2014, and had been recovering at home since. As one of 11 children, Adam's home sees a great deal of traffic from loved ones, friends, and less-familiar acquaintances. Despite the complexities of the story, the assertion was clear. Adam was framed, and a visitor to the house was to blame.

We verified the car accident via police report and confirmed other personal details shared by Adam and his mother. With that knowledge, we opted to publish the story as an interview online. We were unable to ascertain Adam's innocence, but wanted to share the other side to help complete the picture.

What followed were accusations about the authenticity of Adam's claims and our own prosecution of the story. As a result, further accusations against Adam came to light. Henry's incident wasn't the first, and the account had allegedly perpetrated the same transgressions as early as October 31, the day before Adam's accident. Adam's mother was reading



the same comments on our story and emailed me to let me know she had identified the person who was really at fault.

On February 24, we followed up with Adam and his mother. We spoke by phone, at which time we learned more about "Chris," the troubled young man who had been a guest in their home. Chris is 17-years-old and was present on every day connected with a report of harassment by Adam's account. Furthermore, Adam was not home on October 31; he was with friends for Halloween. Chris was at his home, visiting with other members of the family.

We spoke with Chris by phone. What followed was a challenging conversation with someone devoid of remorse. When we asked him what he had to say to his victims, his response was that they should "suck it up." He told us he didn't feel he owed Adam and his mother any words of regret for all the pain and harassment he caused.

While these events force us to question our online interactions and how we treat one another (and might be treated ourselves), there is a happy ending. Bungie had banned Adam's account in response to the video. He called us a few days after our final story ran to let us know he was able to play once more.

As for Henry, he made some new friends. A number of Destiny players, including the Dads of Destiny clan and others, helped Henry level new characters and recover as much progress as possible. A number of our readers reached out with kind words for the boy, and some offered to purchase him the expansion pass or hand over their own PSN accounts.

Despite the despicable chain of events that led us to Henry and Adam, the end result is cause for hope. There are good people out there. The Internet is certainly a minefield, but there are safe havens. This story is a reminder to be safe with your data and interactions, but also that not every aspect of human nature is one to be feared.

g.b.u.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, & THE UGLY

The Good



NINTENDO

is moving into mobile gaming through a partnership with DeNA. The worldwide mobile company will develop new titles for the platform using Nintendo properties. DeNA is creating a membership service across mobile, tablet, 3DS, Wii U, and a new system that Nintendo has started working on codenamed NX.

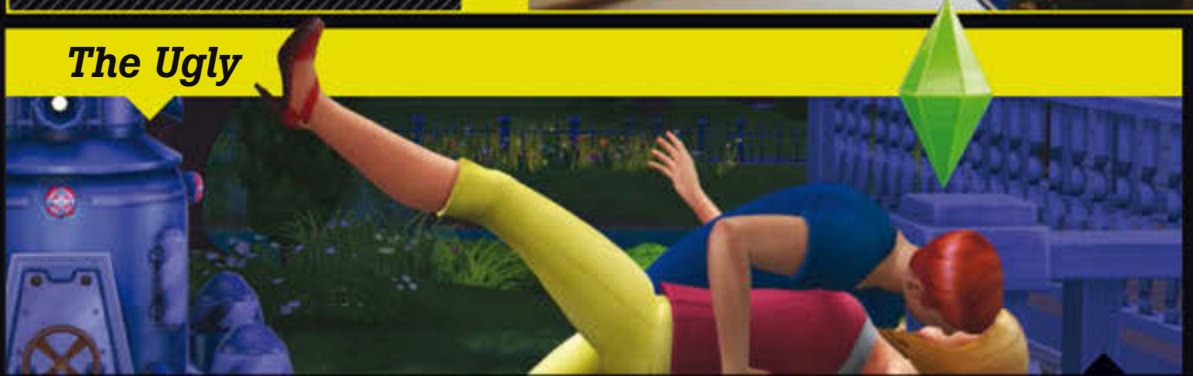
The Bad

DRIVECLUB

developer Evolution Studio has undergone layoffs. The Sony first-party studio will continue to support the game and evolve it "as a service," as well as put out the long-promised free PlayStation Plus Edition of the racer. Sony says the studio will continue to work on projects, although Evolution's capacity will obviously be affected by the downsizing.



The Ugly



ELECTRONIC ARTS

closed Maxis Emeryville – the main studio behind Sims 4, Spore, and SimCity. The Sims and SimCity franchises will continue at other EA developers, and plans will go ahead to support The Sims 4. Maxis Emeryville's last two games, SimCity (2013) and The Sims 4 were criticized by fans. The former required an online connection at launch (which caused problems) and the latter was missing features fans expected to be carried over from previous entries. ◆

Quotable

"...Konami has already resolved to develop a new Metal Gear title. We will be conducting auditions for main staff to lead the development."



– **Konami** vows to continue the venerable series after Kojima recently stated that this will be his last game. "Even if the Metal Gear franchise continues, to me, this is the last Metal Gear," he said.



MICROSOFT STUDIOS' NEW LEADER

An Interview with Kudo Tsunoda

interview by Matt Helgeson

Microsoft Studios vice president Kudo Tsunoda is known to gamers from his days leading the Fight Night franchise at EA and as the front-man for the Kinect peripheral. After a recent promotion, Tsunoda is now overseeing some of Microsoft Studios' development teams, including Rare, Lionhead Studios, and Press Play. We spoke to Tsunoda about his views on the past, present, and future of Microsoft's internal game development efforts.

What would you say is Microsoft's biggest strength in terms of internal development and also its biggest weakness or area in need of improvement?
One of the most fun parts about [starting] the job is the first thing you get to do is go around and spend time with each of the teams and play everything that's in development. I think the greatest strength that we have is such passionate and innovative teams that are building super fun projects. If you ever in this job get to a place where you're going around and [playing] those games – if that's not a fun and rewarding experience, then either we have the wrong teams or I'm totally in the wrong job.

[In terms of] places that we could improve, the stuff that I see in places like Press Play and Twisted Pixel where we have more of a smaller, independent developer kind of mentality in the way that we approach development really brings about a high level of innovation. As we look at the smaller teams that we have within the studio, they are so good at really pushing on not just the types of games that we build, but the way that we build them, and the business models. That's stuff that we are trying to work into the rest of our teams as well.

Rare is under your purview. The name still engenders a lot of passion amongst gamers, but it has underperformed since Microsoft acquired them. What is Rare's focus now – new initiatives, or do they go back to making the higher-budget triple-A original stuff they used to be known for?
I think Rare has done an outstanding job with the products they have built, even going back to our original Xbox 360 titles. They did some great work there, definitely with Kinect and Kinect Sports. With regards to the way you kind of frame it, I don't think those things need to be separated. I think Rare's real strength is getting back to building those kinds of core games that core gamers love, and breathing that sense of delight and innovation into those titles. That's what gamers love them for. It's really letting them build kind of their own initiatives and their own innovations – not, "Hey, this is a technology push or a platform push" as much as really freeing up Rare to build their own innovation within the kind of core gameplay mechanics in those big blockbuster games that fans feel really passionate about.

Can you talk in broad terms about how much new, unannounced IP you have in the works, and to what scale, be it smaller indie-type projects or triple-A projects, those project are?
You know Lionhead is working on Fable Legends. You know titles that we have announced [like] Scalebound, Crackdown, or Quantum Break. And then you're asking me about teams; What is Rare doing? What is Press Play doing? What is Twisted Pixel doing? Clearly, I'm not really in a position to announce or say what they're working on now. But, as far as just the scale of what we're doing and how many products are out there, you even can tell from our conversation that as much as we've announced, there's equal or more that I'm not able to announce right now.

I think one of the interesting things that we can be doing going forward is letting people like you be a good sounding board and to participate in the way that the games are being built at a much earlier stage. I think that's one of the big shifts that you'll start seeing in our products.

Is that a response to the popularity of a lot of Early Access games on Steam and open betas where people are in there, playing it, and you can get their reactions?
There is some difference between [this] and Early Access, where people get to play the games and then, based on the way they play, updating the product to make it better for people playing in the future. That's certainly one part of things. [There's] a way of engaging the community that is allowing them to give feedback on existing things that you're building and give input on future things you should be building – anywhere from what types of games you're building to features you'd like to see. [It's about] getting the running dialogue between the development teams and the game fans going in a stronger way – really bringing fans in and making them feel like they are a core part of the development process. People are so passionate and have so many great ideas about the products.

A lot of competitors are in the VR space. What do you guys see HoloLens doing to separate itself from the pack?
I definitely would say it's a different technology. The thing that HoloLens does is allow you to blend your digital world with your real world. Bringing of those two things together unlocks all kind of different experiences. You could see from the stuff that we showed at the announcement; none of that stuff is things you could do with VR. It's nothing against VR; I think VR is great tech. But it's the blending of the worlds part about HoloLens that makes it unique. From a gameplay perspective, it's being able to make your real world environment an integral part of the experience.

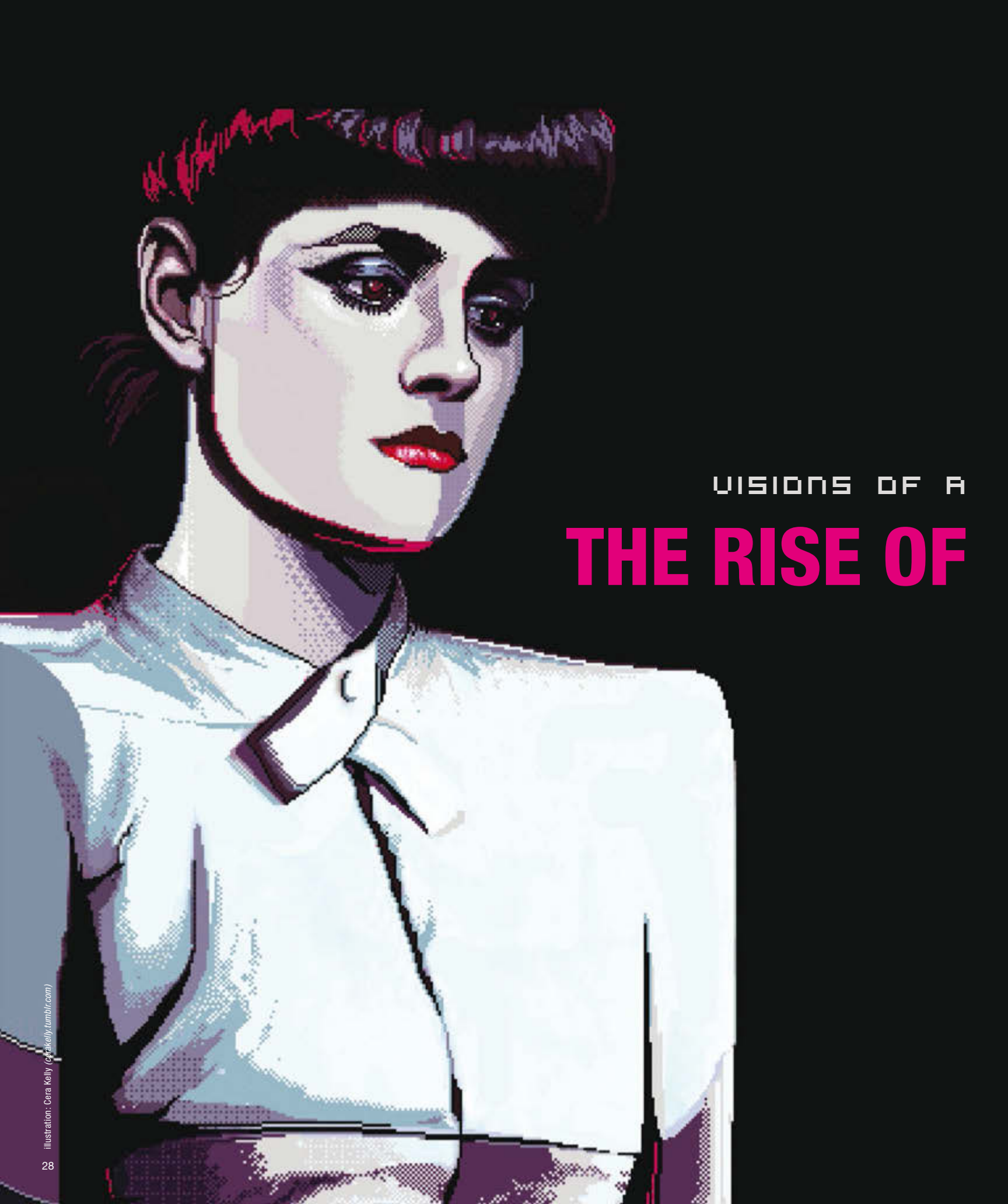
That's really different than what you would get from a VR experience. You can see that from our Skype experience on HoloLens, where you can actually sit on a touch device and draw holograms into the world of somebody wearing the HoloLens. That's a compelling thing for being able to teach people skills, and allowing them to collaborate in ways they couldn't do before. We have this great demo where you have to go and rewire a light switch. I have no idea how to rewire a light switch, then someone sits there and draws into your world step by step how to do the wiring and how to put the thing together. Those are the types of things that, because it incorporates your real world environment with your digital environment, can't be done with VR.

A lot of people in the industry are worried about the rising costs of next-gen triple-A development. Everything is more complex and audiences expect more and more.
Fans of games are always pushing for more – I don't ever think that's something to worry about. That's great; that's what pushes the industry forward. The fans continually pushing the teams to do better is a really healthy and positive thing for developers, because it pushes you to do more. I also feel like there are lots of different types of games that people love to play, there's lots of different ways to approach development, and I think there's room for innovation in the way that we approach building our games as well. Doing the super big budget, blockbuster games, that's a really good and proven way of building our products. [But] I'm always interested in pushing forward other development methodologies.



What are your long-term goals for Microsoft Studios?
In this generation of games, that there's been such an awesome push toward more team-based play – not just cooperative, but cooperative and competitive together. [It's] stuff like what Evolve is doing or what Fable Legends is doing. I've always loved to play multiplayer games; I've always felt like gaming was about bringing people together and letting them be social. Understanding that, I think it's about what other things we can start doing to bring that to the forefront. It's a higher standard of fully emergent gameplay, being able to take people and put them into a full sandbox of tools and let them build their own gameplay.

I'm really hopeful about starting to get the ways we bring the skills of people together in a team to be more robust. [It's] getting matchmaking going that isn't just skill-based, but being able to match people by the way that they play as well as their overall skill. I think getting those elements into the gameplay will be really important. Forza does a great job, with their Drivatar feature, of using the way that people play the games to update and craft the experience for others. Within what we're doing around A.I., you can get a system that really updates and adapts itself through the way people are playing. I think that's a really rich place for us to start unlocking the community's ability to shape these games.



VISIONS OF A

THE RISE OF

illustration: Cera Kelly (ceracakelly.tumblr.com)

DARK FUTURE

CYBERPUNK

As we look forward to another entry in the long-running Deus Ex series with this month's cover story (see p. 44), it's only right that we look back at the roots of cyberpunk and the profound influence the genre has had on popular culture – especially on games. Cyberpunk concepts are now so rooted in the modern understanding of science fiction, it might be hard to imagine a time when the word wasn't part of the lexicon. Take a look back at where all those dystopian futures got their start. ***by Matt Miller***

WHAT IS CYBERPUNK?

Speculative fiction had any number of compelling visions of the future long before cyberpunk came on the scene. From the utopian dream of Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek* to the military imaginings of Robert A. Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*, creative voices had no shortage of ideas regarding humanity's future. However, the advent of computers and the rise of corporate culture in the '70s and '80s worked together to foster a bleak new fictional backdrop.

Cyberpunk is a broad-reaching genre often defined by exceptions rather than rules, but a few major tenets show up again and again. Cyberpunk envisions a high-technology future, but that technology has rarely led to an improvement in the quality of life for humanity. Instead, giant corporate entities (often called mega-corporations) have come to dominate the social and political landscape, dictating the way people live. Giant cities house an overwhelmed and destitute lower class, while the few rich and powerful hide behind the protection of their monolithic companies. Artificial intelligence runs rampant, often altering the very nature of how people live and work.

While some cyberpunk reaches out into outer space, it's rare that the genre leaps into interstellar voyages. Instead, the genre has a grounded near-future setting on Earth or its nearby planets and moon. These grim urban locales lend themselves well to noire overtones, and it's not unusual to find allusions to private detectives in long trench coats and beautiful women who aren't what they seem. Protagonists are rarely cut-and-dried do-gooders. The "punk" moniker comes from predominantly anti-heroes in the lead role – counter-culture loners put upon by the system and forced to take action.

Cyberpunk is pessimistic and dark, and its themes tend to run toward cautionary tales, as if to say: This might be where we're headed if society doesn't change course.



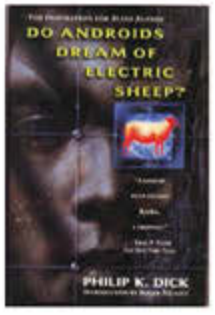
Neuromancer and Snow Crash served as inspiration for *The Matrix* films

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?

There's no clear line in the sand about the earliest appearance of cyberpunk, but it's hard to chart the genre's origins without mentioning novelist Philip K. Dick. The visionary author explored issues of A.I., corporate governance, and social decay throughout his career, and inspired countless creators with his surreal stories.

Not coincidentally, it was the adaptation of one of Dick's short stories that led to one of the most foundational visualizations of cyberpunk fiction. Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* built on the foundation established in Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. The movie starred Harrison Ford as a man out of time, wandering through a neon-soaked city that housed androids who might be people.

While dozens of authors tried their hand at the emerging field, William Gibson's *Neuromancer* became the de facto standard. Its hacker star and dystopian vision of virtual reality world called "the Matrix" helped further define the genre. Many of its ideas, along with Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, served as inspiration for one of cyberpunk's most popular offshoots in later years: the Wachowskis' *The Matrix* film series.



Blade Runner, adapted from Philip K. Dick's short story, helped incorporate cyberpunk into the public consciousness

THE EARLY ADVENTURES

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, game creators were eager to tap into the potential for riffing on cyberpunk settings and themes, and in the years since we've seen dozens of games that flirt with the genre.

Some of the earliest interactive explorations of cyberpunk came from the tabletop RPG world. Ready to move on from the wizards and dragons that dominated early Dungeons & Dragons games, titles like Cyberpunk 2020 and Shadowrun tapped into the opportunity to control a character in a dystopian future.

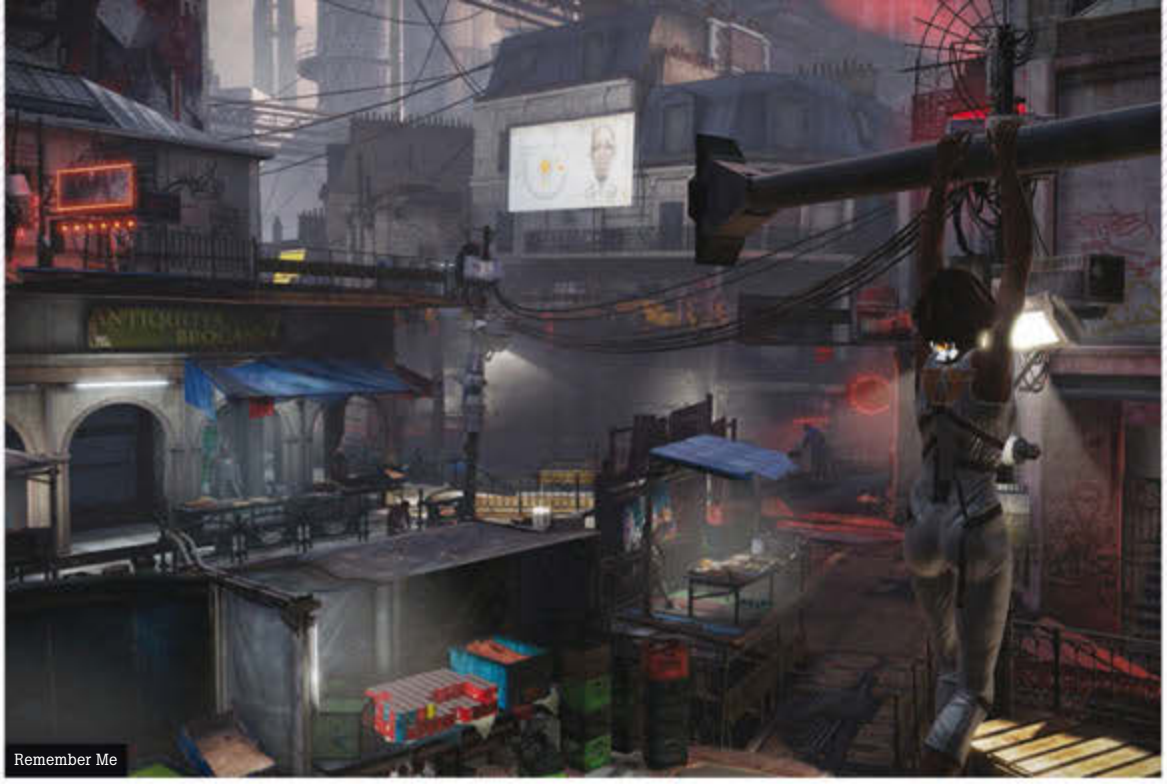
With its focus on storytelling, puzzle solving, and exploration, the adventure game was a great avenue to capitalize on cyberpunk's potential. While lesser known in the United States, 1988's Snatcher drew heavily on story conceits introduced in *Blade Runner* and the foundational anime, *Akira*. The mostly first-person adventure had players investigating a plot wherein real people had been kidnapped and replaced by A.I. bioroids. Beyond its role as an early innovator in game storytelling, Snatcher was also written and directed by Hideo Kojima of Metal Gear fame.

Another adventure game, Rise of the Dragon (1990) barely disguised its emulation of *Blade Runner*'s main character Agent Deckard and urban setting. William "Blade" Hunter is a police officer turned private investigator making his way through futuristic Los Angeles on a hunt for the killer of the mayor's daughter. By 1994, Burn Cycle added full-motion video into the adventure/puzzle experience, and told the story of a hacker inflicted with a virus that will destroy his brain if he doesn't find a cure within two hours.

One of the most fondly remembered adventure games rooted in cyberpunk themes arrived in 1995 with the release of I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream. Based on the Harlan Ellison short story of the same name, the story involved a malevolent artificial intelligence that wipes out all of humanity except for five individuals. Players choose between the five distinct characters, and confront the deadly computer in bewildering psychodramas. Through exploring oppressive and mature topics of insanity and the nature of existence, the title stands apart as an early PC classic.



Snatcher


Remember Me


Satellite Reign


Watch Dogs

BRANCHING OUT

Beyond a number of adventure games, other genres explored cyberpunk throughout the 1990s. While stretching the boundaries of the genre, the cinematic platformer Flashback (1992) included corrupt cops, memory transfers, and corrupt manipulation by the powerful, and its 2D rotoscoped visuals mixed shadowy backgrounds into alien worlds. Syndicate (1993) embraced the urban landscape from a real-time tactical view, putting the player in command of a team of cyborg soldiers taking part in a shadow war against rival corporations. And the magic-meets-tech world of Shadowrun finally transitioned from tabletop to digital screen with two console releases. The SNES and Genesis Shadowrun games were completely different, but both managed to aptly relay the fascinating fiction of ork deckers and elven street samurai fighting it out on the futuristic streets of Seattle.

As first-person shooters rose to prominence in the mid to late '90s, several cyberpunk releases provided something different than shooting demons or Nazis. System Shock (1994) blended puzzle solving with enemy confrontations. Set in 2072, players controls a hacker trying to halt the efforts of an A.I. called SHODAN, who has taken over a massive space station. The pioneering game had a follow-up in 1999 with System Shock 2, which once again explored issues of A.I. gone out of control, this time aboard a starship in 2114. Deus Ex (2000) introduced a profound level of personal choice, stealth, and role-playing elements into a first-person shooting framework. The widely praised game embraced its cyberpunk roots in its exploration of humanity's interaction with technology in a grim and uncertain future.





















Transistor



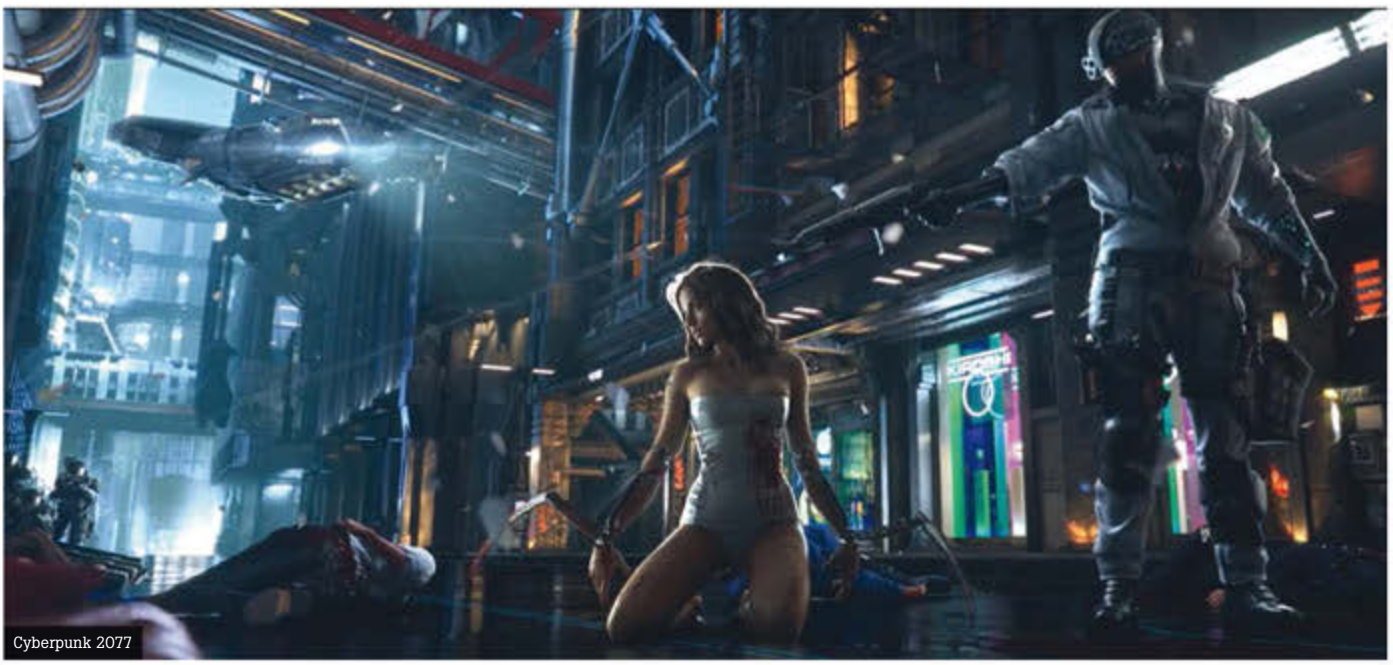
Shadowrun Returns

STILL GAINING STEAM

The popularity of cyberpunk seems to ebb and rise as the years pass, and one need only wait a short time between entries before witnessing a revival. Recently, Deus Ex: Human Revolution (2011) revived the long-dormant franchise with aplomb. The excellent PC and mobile adventure game Gemini Rue (2011) feels both futuristic and nostalgic. The action game Remember Me (2013) explores fundamentally cyberpunk themes of personal identity and memory. Watch Dogs (2014) posits a pre-cyberpunk world, where computerized monitoring and tech are beginning to control society, and Transistor (2014) draws heavily on cyberpunk visuals and themes to tell its story of a futuristic city being pulled into ruin.

As we head into the future, there's no shortage of options to be excited about. Satellite Reign aims to be a spiritual successor to the classic Syndicate games, lending a modern gameplay edge to tactical urban play. Harebrained Schemes' success in reviving Shadowrun is leading to a new title set in Hong Kong. The creators of The Witcher games at CD-Projekt RED are steering toward a release of Cyberpunk 2077 in the coming years. Our cover story this month, Deus Ex: Mankind Divided takes the next step for the vaunted series.

While one of the only constants for cyberpunk fans is arguing over what is or isn't part of the definition, there's no arguing that the genre is alive and well in video games. If anything, the recent resurgence of cyberpunk storytelling may be the most concentrated we've seen since the genre's inception. All signs indicate a bright future for dark futures, and that's good news for game players.



Cyberpunk 2077



Dads Of Destiny

How one forum post became a gaming movement



Jason "Kingpin2" Edwards

Twitter:
@DestinyDads

Before Destiny's release, new father Jason "Kingpin2" Edwards posted on the Bungie forums asking how others plan on participating in the final game while also balancing family responsibilities. The post made waves and eventually formed into one of the largest groups in Destiny at over 30,000 members. We spoke with Edwards, who lives in Wales, about Dads of Destiny's origins, its altruistic efforts to help gamers in need, and what's next.

interview by Bryan Vore

What were you looking for in that first Bungie.net post?
I used to have quite a lot of time to play games. I've met my partner and had my beautiful little girl and things changed. My daughter is only two years old, so my question to the community as whole was, "As a busy father and husband or boyfriend or fiancé: how would you find the time to play a game as awesome as this?" I never expected it to be as massive a response as it had.

How did Dads of Destiny become an official group?
The guy that came to me originally was a man called Stop Shooting Me. He asked, "Do you know how to make a group?" I was a new member and had no idea. I said, "Let's get this thing started and see how it goes." So he started this thing up and said, "Here are the keys. This is your baby." We grouped together a small group of dads from that thread, and it carried on from there. When it turned to 992 – I'll never forget the number – the Community Focus [a blog post on various Destiny fans] was launched by DeeJ [David Dague]. In a few days about 3 or 4 thousand members were built up. That was quite a surprise.

You allow more than just dads in the group, right?
Yes, definitely. There are members who fall in our family category, where you have sons, daughters, mothers, wives, and girlfriends who will come in and play. We are not exclusive. We don't say, "Hold on a minute – you can't come in here."

How do you organize the group?
We wanted to try to set up areas to meet each other and be able to play with people in their time zones. A fairly clever chap called Deep-Fried Dave created something we call the Dad-a-base. With that, you can put in your information, play time, play style, location, and when you're available. People can search to find others in their local area or their time zone. If you look on dadsofdestiny.net you can see people in Argentina, China, Russia. They're so far spread [out], it's unreal.

How is all the various content on the site handled?
I work at a supermarket on nights. That's all I do. The little bit of free time I have I spend trying to sort this group out. I'm active in every little area that I can be. You've got the content guys; you've got the webmaster, Buruko. He does a fantastic job and helps me out with a lot of the leadership stuff, as does Deep-Fried Dave. You've got the podcast guys – that's taken off dramatically. You've got the content guys who deal with the creative writing side of things. Animation. The Twitch team holds stream events. There's fundraising that we've done. Trying to keep hold of everything that's going on is a difficult task. It's very challenging, but I love it.

DoD is known for helping the community, recently offering assistance to the kid whose characters were deleted on a live stream.
We just thought we needed to do something to try and make it right. [Destiny YouTube and streaming personality] My name is Byf came to me and we spoke about trying to get Raid teams together for him to boost him through levels, try to get his gear back, and help him build up the characters he lost. Thankfully, a lot of people jumped on that bandwagon and I think now he is back to where he was, which is fantastic.

That is just one thing this community has done. One clan helped a gentleman really fantastically. He had lost his job, his partner had lost her job, and I think he had a son who was seven weeks away from being born. They had basically lost the apartment and were struggling. The clan came together and they sent him parcels with diapers, food, and things to help them get back on their feet. I thought that was absolutely amazing. He posted a video as thanks and they are now better off.

What's next for Dads of Destiny?
There's a whole bunch things going on at the moment that are very promising. Obviously, the future for Destiny is quite strong. You've got a community base over the next presumed 10 years. We are looking and speaking to different people with regards to growth in different games.

Personally, I've been helped by this group quite a bit, with regards to when my daughter was teething and potty training. The advice I've had from dads has been absolutely fantastic. I really do hope that that it grows and the community bands together more as a support group than a gaming group.

There are two developers we're speaking to about different things, so where that's going to go I don't know, but that's quite exciting.

Are you branching out to other games?
Definitely. You will probably see Dads of The Division, also Call of Duty, [and] maybe Battlefield or Star Wars Battlefront.



EVOLVE

Evolve launched over a month ago, but true to the game's title, Turtle Rock Studios is still working feverishly to bring changes and new content to the 4v1 multiplayer shooter. We talked with Turtle Rock co-founder and creative director Phil Robb about Evolve's launch, their plans for the future, and coping with the unwavering cynicism of the Internet. *by Jeff Marchiafava*

2K released some impressive first-week gameplay stats for Evolve, but the number of players has declined substantially. How is Evolve's player base trending? Are you happy with where it's at so far?
Ha! We're never satisfied. There is always room for improvement and we're always looking for ways to get better. That said, Evolve's player base is trending as most triple-A online game player bases do: There's huge concurrencies day one, and then it settles out over the course of the game's lifetime. We see Evolve as a living entity. Our plan is to continue to support and grow the game over time. We're in this for the long haul, and part of that is riding the concurrency waves through the highs and the lows. We've got a lot of cool stuff in the pipe and expect that as we grow the game, the community will grow with it. So even though our concurrencies may be lower in week five versus week one, we believe that we'll be able to boost concurrencies with all the new content and challenges we have planned.

Countless games have had day-one DLC, but a surprising amount of anger has been directed at Evolve's offerings. Why do you think Evolve has become the target of such scrutiny in that area?
Honestly, I'm not sure. It definitely took us off guard. There was certainly some misinformation early on that seemed to take hold and spread; we were catching flak for doing things that we weren't doing and had never planned to do. Triple-A game development just keeps getting more expensive. DLC is one of the ways publishers and developers are able to stay profitable. It isn't going to go away anytime soon, but there are ways that you can offer it that are better than others. End of the day, we worked really hard to come up with a DLC plan that we felt good about as gamers. No pay-to-win, no splitting the community. We achieved those goals and feel good about it.

Other players have complained about Evolve's DLC pricing – $7.50 per hunter and $15 per monster. What is your response to those who say the DLC is too expensive?
It's a tricky question, and I don't think there is a definitive answer. The idea of "value" is completely subjective; everyone has their own value meter. The price of the Evolve DLC characters and monsters is largely based on how many resources it takes to develop them. We've all seen games charge $15 for cosmetic items that don't really offer any value outside of making your character look different. The stuff we're offering with Evolve is completely new. Each new character and monster is a unique packet of assets and gameplay. These things are definitely not easy to make and it takes us a lot of time and money to do it. But in the end we feel good about the value you're getting when you buy a new monster or character because we're adding real depth to the Evolve experience.

You have stated all future maps and modes will be free for everyone. Are you actively working on new maps and modes at this time, and do you have a timetable for when players will see them?
Yes we are, and no we don't. But by the time readers pick up this issue, two new free maps and Observer Mode will be out in the wild.

There's been no shortage of fantasy lists posted online for potential future monsters. How big of a concern is the lore in terms of adding crazy monsters in the future?
We like to keep the lore consistent and have it make sense as much as possible, but I wouldn't say that is a barrier to trying something really wild and crazy. We've got some pretty messed up ideas floating around for monsters. If it's a cool enough idea, we'll make it work.

How do you stay positive and enthusiastic in the face of so much cynicism? Does it ever get to you?
Sure it does. I think I can speak for a good number of game developers out there when I say that it's never fun to see years of work get trashed by someone that barely gave the game the time of day or, for whatever reason, came into it already having decided they hate it. At the same time, that's part of the gig. Sometimes there is some good data buried in the vitriol. A lot of people told us that Left 4 Dead would fail, but we went and built it anyway because there was an experience there that we wanted to have. We recognize that we're doing something out of the ordinary and that some people may not immediately embrace that. That's what you face when you try to do something new.

Read the unabridged Afterwords at gameinformer.com/mag

The Indies Of GDC & PAX

by GI Staff

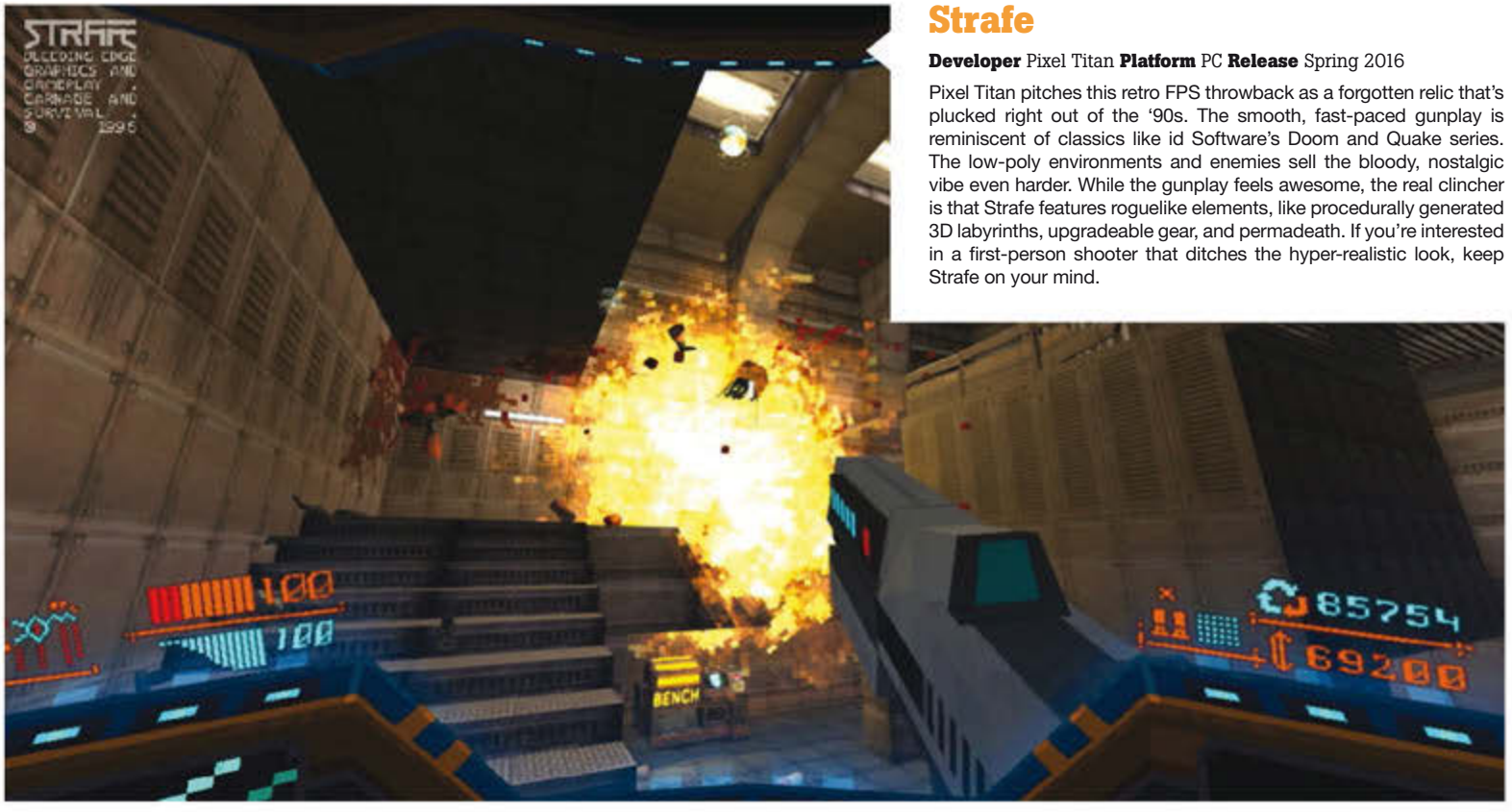
Both the Game Developer's Conference and Penny Arcade Expo have become venues for indie developers to show off their latest projects. We scoured the show floors and came across a dozen games that captured our attention.

Outer Wilds

Developer Team Outer Wilds **Platform** PC **Release** TBA

This project from a group of USC students took home the Seumas McNally Grand Prize at the 2015 Independent Game Festival Awards. The intergalactic adventure places players in the shoes of a young alien astronaut preparing for its first space voyage. Once you take off from your home planet, you must explore the nearby planet to learn more about the origin of the solar system and the ancient ruin kept at the home-world observatory. In a nod to Majora's Mask, after every 20 minutes of playtime the universe ends with a supernova explosion, leaving you to start from square one again with only the data you recorded in your spaceship to guide you. Without player leveling, proper mission structure, or resource gathering to worry about, you can devote all your time to unraveling this charming game's mysteries. You can download an early build of the game for free from the Outer Wilds website, but with the $30,000 winnings now at the team's disposal, you can bet they have some ambitious plans for honing this celestial experience.





Strafe

Developer Pixel Titan **Platform** PC **Release** Spring 2016

Pixel Titan pitches this retro FPS throwback as a forgotten relic that's plucked right out of the '90s. The smooth, fast-paced gunplay is reminiscent of classics like id Software's Doom and Quake series. The low-poly environments and enemies sell the bloody, nostalgic vibe even harder. While the gunplay feels awesome, the real clincher is that Strafe features roguelike elements, like procedurally generated 3D labyrinths, upgradeable gear, and permadeath. If you're interested in a first-person shooter that ditches the hyper-realistic look, keep Strafe on your mind.



Push Me Pull You

Developer House House **Platform** PC **Release** 2015

The local-multiplayer scene has been on fire lately, and that streak continues with an odd two-on-two title by the Australian-based House House. In Push Me Pull You, each player controls one end of a bizarro snake-human thing. The two teams compete to push the competitors' ball off an arena while defending their own. Players can expand and contract these absurd creatures on the fly, complete with unsettling sound effects and animations that keep players laughing uncomfortably. Like many promising indie-multiplayer games, the concept is brilliant in its infectious simplicity.

Reflections

Developer Broken Window Studios **Platform** PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC
Release April

What do the little choices we make say about us as people? In Reflections, a first-person interactive adventure, every action you take has consequences and says something about you. The game begins on the day before you head off to college, so you must decide how to spend your very last day home. You can focus on relationships, go exploring, get things in order for college, or just play horseshoes. Time passes as you play, allowing only a certain number of tasks. Circumstances change based on these decisions, opening up new paths or events. Even more intriguing is the game assesses your personality type at the end based on how you spent your time. Your actions can lead you down the path of being an office executive, going out in the wilderness, or living with your family, to name a few.









Prismata

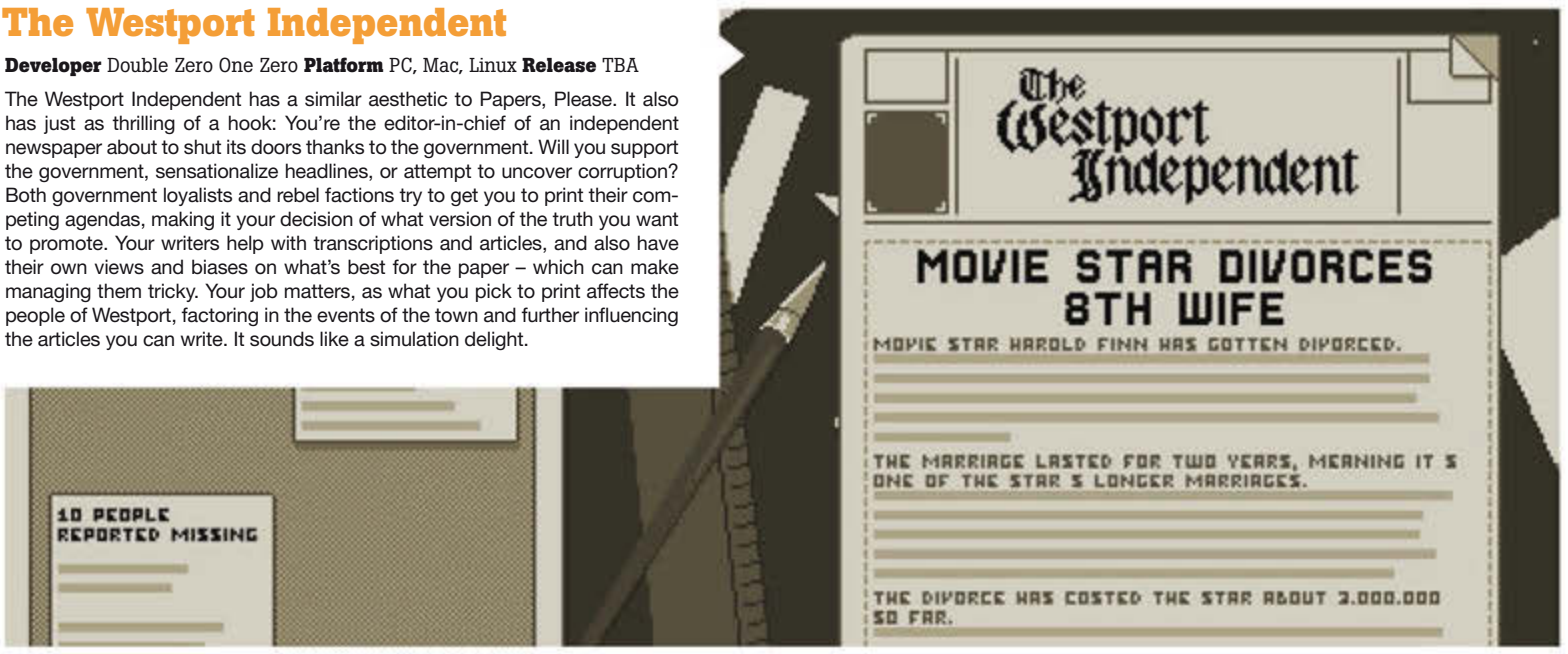
Developer Lunarch Studios **Platform** PC, Mac **Release** TBA

In the ever-expanding world of digital card games, the sci-fi-themed Prismata has a hook – there are no decks to build, ever. Players have access to the same core cards to play each game, and face off in a sort of resource war to destroy the opponent. Do you create a more economical base to prepare for a strong endgame, or come out of the gate swinging? There's another catch to keep things fresh from game to game in the form of a random assortment of cards placed in the pool each match. This means that each game varies greatly in terms of strategies used, because while both players have access to the same card pool, they may choose to pursue different ways to win. Because of the shared card pool, there's absolutely no randomness involved, making each round a test of skill from start to finish.

The Westport Independent

Developer Double Zero One Zero **Platform** PC, Mac, Linux **Release** TBA

The Westport Independent has a similar aesthetic to Papers, Please. It also has just as thrilling of a hook: You're the editor-in-chief of an independent newspaper about to shut its doors thanks to the government. Will you support the government, sensationalize headlines, or attempt to uncover corruption? Both government loyalists and rebel factions try to get you to print their competing agendas, making it your decision of what version of the truth you want to promote. Your writers help with transcriptions and articles, and also have their own views and biases on what's best for the paper – which can make managing them tricky. Your job matters, as what you pick to print affects the people of Westport, factoring in the events of the town and further influencing the articles you can write. It sounds like a simulation delight.





Cuphead

Developer Studio MDHR **Platform** Xbox One, PC **Release** 2015

This tribute to the classic cartoons of yesteryear is a colorful feast for the eyes. We've spent plenty of time drooling over the visuals, but we finally got to play it. Thankfully, Cuphead plays as well as it looks. The core gameplay is a collection of super-difficult boss battles, where reading cues (like a pirate whistling to summon a giant squid) is paramount to survival. The fast-paced, run-and-gun action feels as tight and responsive as the classic console games it's inspired by. Get ready to be simultaneously charmed and challenged.

Through The Woods

Developer Antagonist **Platform** PC **Release** 2016

Through the Woods is a horror game with a truly horrifying premise: Your child has been stolen by an enigmatic creature called Old Erik, and you have to enter a forest at night to rescue him. Armed only with a flashlight, the child's mother has to confront her fears and the menacing darkness. Sound takes a starring role, selling the idea that she's nervous and that there's more going on in the woods than what she can see. Developer Antagonist says it won't rely on jump scares, but are instead trying to make the entire experience uncomfortable for the player. The tale is framed with audio of the mother being questioned by police. It's an intriguing setup – did she rescue her child, or was she found by police at the site of a gruesome crime scene?







Moon Hunters

Developer Kitfox Games **Platform** PlayStation 4, Vita, PC
Release February

In Moon Hunters, you are cooperatively exploring an ancient Mesopotamian world with up to three other players. Kitfox's game is an action/RPG, complete with swords and magic. Each character has a regular attack and a more powerful one that's on a cooldown. The entire world is procedurally generated, so every time you play will be different, allowing you to create several legends. The most exciting part is that you're building a culture's mythology with your choices. A storyteller starts the game telling your legend, and you determine how that plays out. Your choices earn you certain personality traits. For instance, if someone asks you for food, you can either gain the compassionate or selfish trait. Your story could end up being one of rags to riches to gaining and losing pride.



Mayan Death Robots

Developer Sileni Studios **Platform** PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC
Release August (PC and one console), TBD (other console)

If you can't gain the favor of a god, be a god. In this Scorched Earth-like artillery game, players vie for domination by choosing heavily armed Mayan robots to destroy their opponent's core. This is handled via simultaneous turns during which players can choose one of two primary weapons, jumping, or (if available) rebuilding terrain with tetrominos to shield their core.

Every eighth turn, a wheel spins and awards both players a single-use power. These include heavy explosives and the amusingly frustrating block rocket that encloses opponents in terrain (and likely causes them to inflict splash damage on themselves). You can destroy an opposing robot, but that doesn't end the game. It just knocks them out for the next turn. Depleting the core's health (or blowing up the terrain underneath and dropping it into the abyss) leads to victory. We suspect that after playing it you'll be more than willing to accept a rematch.

Earthlock: Festival Of Magic

Developer Snow Castle Games **Platform** PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Wii U, PC, Mac, Linux
Release October

This turn-based RPG comes from developers who previously worked at studios such as Ubisoft, Rockstar North, and LucasArts. In Earthlock, the world has stopped spinning. This left half of it is dark and the other half light. You recruit up to eight playable characters, each with their own unique skillset, like damage-dealers or healers, and engage in fun battles. You're always aware of your turn order, and can use abilities like haste to alter it. Every character has two different stances that lend them different abilities; one can be more defensive, while another can give you perks like stealing. Switching between stances costs you a turn, but gives you more options in the heat of battle; forcing you to assess the best move in the long run.



Jenny LeClue

Developer Mograf **Platform** PC, Mac, Linux **Release** Winter

Jenny LeClue is an intelligent young detective trying to prove her mother's innocence in a murder. The adventure game is story-focused and choice plays a big factor, changing the outcomes between chapters. A narrator, Finklestein, tells Jenny's story, but your choices can change what he says and even how his story plays out. Jenny LeClue harkens back to old-school point-and-click adventures, allowing you to click all over the backdrop. The game rewards you for doing so, whether it's with humor or new observations. The handmade graphics already stand out along with the strong writing, positive female lead, and exploration of issues like loss and identity. We can't wait to choose our own adventure and see how Jenny LeClue turns out.



interview



photo: Craig Sherod

Championing Creativity

With a background that includes work on The Sims, Boom Blox, and Journey, Robin Hunicke is one of the leading lights in indie development. We spoke with her about her work at Funomena, views on the industry, and her new collaboration with Katamari Damacy creator Keita Takahashi.

interview by Matt Helgeson

Maxis was your first job in the industry. Now that it's closed, what do you see as its legacy in the game industry?
The Sims and SimCity were key turning points in my understanding of what games could be. I can remember sitting in the computer lab and playing SimCity and thinking that it was so amazing that someone had taken the time to program all these little pieces of feedback into the system, and that there were so many complex outcomes. The Sims were so entertaining and so compelling and weird. The first time you play it, you can't believe you are getting so caught up in the lives of these little simulated people who aren't much smarter than ants. Yet, I have real feeling about their decisions.

As a developer, the Sims 2 expansion team was my first team. I was so blown away by how diverse and open-minded the team was. It was 50 percent women; in some areas there were more women than men. There were people from all walks of life, all over the globe. There were so many people that had come to work on the Sims because they were fans, like me. It set the tone for me for what game development can and should be – really inclusive, extremely creative, and fun.

You also worked on Boom Blox. How involved was Steven Spielberg in making those games?
He was very involved. He was an ideal collaborator because he was in the office every couple of weeks. He'd show up usually early for the meetings. He was patient and kind with everyone. He had a lot of ideas, but wasn't attached to his own ideas. He would play the game a lot. Even if he was off-site on a shoot, we would send him the discs so he could play. The lesson for me was that, if you look at the highest levels of performance in any creative endeavor, you'll find that the people who are most successful are really humble and really open to other people's ideas. But, at the same time, they really put their effort where their mouth is and put a lot of attention to how the product is developing.

As someone who cares about inclusivity and diversity in games, it's been a problematic year, with GamerGate and everything else. Ultimately, there has to be a path forward on these issues aside from fighting about it on social media. What steps need to be taken in the industry and community, and are you optimistic that they can be taken?
I'm a consummate optimist – I believe that there are no problems in society that we can't solve with kindness and brainpower. The goal should be balance. Technology and computer science companies in general are out of balance. There is a 50/50 ratio of men and women in the world, and you look at technology and it's 70/30, 80/20, or even 90/10 in some areas.

Everybody has unconscious biases, and we all understand people who are similar to us easier and better than people who are different from us. It just takes a personal commitment for us to keep reaching out to overcome whatever stereotypes or assumptions we might make inadvertently. Games are an amazing medium, and the thing I try to focus on is getting new people into the boat. If you look at the Experimental Games Workshop and the games we show, it's not about who makes them, it's about what these games represent and what they make us feel and what they express. Over time, if we stay interested in new games and new ways of playing, we'll eventually find new voices and hit that balance.

You've talked about the importance of remembering that players are humans and not just data sets. Is there a danger of developers depending too much on analytics?
When you have access to data about what players do, and you can pull all that into a spreadsheet, it's tempting to starting thinking of the people behind those numbers as just numbers. When you look at the games that have really connected with people, you'll find that the developers are always thinking about the player experience. A game like League of Legends, you can just tell – that team is so tuned in to what makes the players feel powerful and victorious. You look at a game like Minecraft and you see a game where someone spent an incredible amount of time trying to make you feel that sense of exploration and survival, and being really proud of what you built. That is so important to making a game that's meaningful and lasts beyond just being released and earning some money. I think the most successful games are the ones where you blend a passion for making players feel something with execution and great design.

Obviously, Journey isn't a triple-A game. We didn't spend time shipping models off to China or outsourcing teams. It was made by 12 people. But it had a unique look and was grounded in the experience of the player. That's what makes games worth making.

How did the Wattam project come together with Katamari Damacy creator Keita Takahashi?
Keita and I were working together in Vancouver on [Tiny Speck's MMO] Glitch, and it became clear to me that I needed to do my own thing. As I started thinking about what I really wanted to do, we started brainstorming Luna, the other game we're doing [at Funomena]. Then, Glitch got shut down, and he said, "We should make a game together."

It naturally evolved out of our connection. I met Keita in 2003 before Katamari was even known in the Western world. I saw it at the Tokyo Game Show and I brought it over at the Experimental Gameplay Workshop. It did so well there that they decided to translate it and bring it over to the States. So, we've been friends since then. One of the core values of Funomena is to make people like Keita happy, to let them make the games they want to make in a sustainable environment with a living wage, without worrying about pitching and where the next paycheck is going to come from.

VR was a major theme at the recent Game Developer's Conference. How excited are you for virtual reality?
Well, I just announced that I will be working with Oculus on a short film with their story studio group at Sundance last month. I've been doing research on VR for a while now. I really believe that VR is an amazing opportunity for developers – especially developers like us that are trying to make games that are a bridge between game and film. We're experimenting and prototyping, and working on game designs for VR and blended reality. It's a beautiful thing to be completely immersed, but it's also great to have another element in your current reality.

What are your long-term goals for Funomena?
I would love it if, in 10 years, Funomena was in a strong, connected place with the community in San Francisco. We'd have a facility, and on the lower floor you could come in and there would be a public demonstration place for games that people could come and play. We could have classes for young and aspiring developers. On the upper floor, there could be a development studio focused on the kinds of non-profit and outreach projects we like to do. Obviously, to have commercial development there as well. [It would have] three tiers: engaging with the community, outreach, and training; games that are commercial but still really related to the public good, and then developing commercial titles that push the boundaries of technology. I do believe we are headed that way. And, in addition to all that, for the rents in San Francisco to go down by two-thirds! [Laughs]

What are you most excited about for the indie game scene and what is your biggest fear?
My fear is that we would be lazy and comfortable with the games we already know we're good at making. There's always the temptation to lean into what you already know. I want us to keep taking risks. My dream is that, by taking risks, we reach not only new players but new creators. The games that inspired me – The Sims, PaRappa the Rapper, Katamari, Rez, these kind of games – they came from people who wanted to do something different. That inspired me to become a game creator. If I can do that, we all can do that. And, if we all can do that, the diversity of bizarre, awesome games that are available to us in 50 years will be even greater than it is now. Someday, I'm going to have to retire and all I'll have to do is play games, and I want some awesome games out there.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1985
PLAYS WELL WITH OTHERS
Hunicke falls for the M.U.L.E., simulation game that's generally heralded as one of the first PC multiplayer titles

1991
NEW POSSIBILITIES
Hunicke enrolls at the University of Chicago, where she designs her own major that incorporates oral narrative, film, art, gender studies, and computer science. She submits a computer program based on the poetry of Octavio Paz as her undergrad thesis

1995
THE MASTER
Hunicke goes on to grad school at University of Chicago and Northwestern doing A.I. research and work on dynamic difficulty in games

2005
SIM LIFE
After meeting Will Wright at a conference, Hunicke enters game development at Maxis working on The Sims 2: Open for Business expansion

2007
BLOCK ART
Hunicke moves from Maxis to Electronic Arts proper, where she works on MySims and Steven Spielberg's Boom Blox games

2009
IN GOOD COMPANY
Hunicke joins Kellee Santiago and Jenova Chen at the art-house studio thatgamecompany

2012
FANTASTIC VOYAGE
Thatgamecompany ships Journey, an ethereal shared-world game that becomes one of the most critically acclaimed games ever

2012
COMPLICATED FUN
After working briefly on a game called Glitch, Hunicke co-founds Funomena with ex-thatgamecompany colleague Martin Middleton. They are joined by Katamari Damacy creator Keita Takahashi, who is working on Wattam for the studio

2014
BACK TO SCHOOL
Hunicke joins UC Santa Cruz as an associate professor of art in the university's Games and Playable Media program



PARROT ZIK 2.0



by Ben Reeves

Using Parrot's updated Zik Bluetooth headphones feels like test-driving a luxury car – many of its features are lavish, but the whole experience feels frivolous. These slick-looking headphones wrap their user's head in faux-leather comfort, and allow them to adjust volume, skip music tracks, and even answer phone calls by swiping the ear cup's touch-sensitive surface. A companion app even lets you tweak equalizer settings on the fly. Six noise-canceling microphones effectively place you inside your own, interference-free sound bubble.

The Zik 2.0's only Achilles' heel is battery life. We ran out of juice in a little under six hours, which wasn't even enough to make it through a workday. However, you can squeeze nearly 18 hours of playtime from its rechargeable batteries if you only use the headphones in wired mode. All told, the Zik's supreme audio quality and peerless extras put it at the head of its class, but budget-conscious audiophiles can probably make do with a headset marketed at half the price.

VERY GOOD

$399 | *parrot.com*



1 LG 24GM77

A state-of-the-art graphics card only gets you so far; if you want the best PC gaming experience, you still need a great gaming monitor. LG's newest line of gaming monitors has a smooth 144Hz refresh rate. While we thought this 24-inch monitor's blacks could have been a little richer, its range of color is impressive. LG's Clear Motion 240 technology helps reduce this monitor's effective response time to less than one millisecond, keeping visuals nearly stutter free. Meanwhile, a Dynamic Action Sync system helps reduce visual lag, which in turn makes gameplay feel tighter – a plus for intense action games like Dark Souls II and DmC: Devil May Cry. LG's design sense might be generic, but its hardware could help you improve your performance without taking a screwdriver to your CPU tower.

SUPERB

$349 | *lg.com*

2 Sling TV

Sling TV is a subscription service that helps preserve traditional cable content while tempting you to cut the cord. We love being able to access networks like ESPN, AMC, TNT, CNN, Cartoon Network, and Disney from our PC, TV, or mobile device at any time. For an extra fee you can add specialty channels like Sundance TV, ESPNU, and The Cooking Network, but there is no option to add basic stations such as NBC and CBS, or premium networks like HBO and Showtime. We also wish that we could watch more than one stream at a time; if you're watching *Mad Men* on your TV downstairs, your roommates won't be able to stream Adult Swim on their phone in the bedroom from the same account. Unlike services like Hulu, Sling TV focuses on giving you access to live television, so you won't find much on-demand content or DVR functionality here. Still, the service's affordable subscription model makes it a compelling alternative to traditional cable packages.

AVERAGE

$20 (monthly subscription) | *sling.com*

Media Shelf



THE LEAGUE OF REGRETTABLE SUPERHEROES BY JON MORRIS

Comic books are filled with wild and creative ideas, but as history has proved, sometimes these ideas are a little too off-the-wall. Cartoonist and graphic designer Jon Morris rounds up the lamest super heroes to ever reach the printed page, complete with fictional overviews and vintage art.

$24.95
quirkbooks.com

MODEST MOUSE – STRANGERS TO OURSELVES

Featuring songs such as "Lampshades on Fire," which is an energetic exploration of cosmic futility, the band known for eccentric melodies and a janky cadence returns with their first studio album in almost eight years.

$22.98
modestmouse.com

THE SCULPTOR BY SCOTT MCCLOUD

After making a deal with Death, a young sculptor named David Smith learns to sculpt anything he can imagine using his bare hands – including the love of his life. Unfortunately, now David only has 200 days left to live.

$29.99
scottmccloud.vg

SILICON VALLEY: THE COMPLETE FIRST SEASON

In the high-stakes world of Internet start-ups, one great idea can make you a millionaire. Sadly, giving birth to that great idea isn't easy for a group of socially awkward underdogs. Mike Judge's (*Office Space, Beavis and Butt-head*) new comedy is one of the most consistently funny shows on television.

$49.99
hbo.com/silicon-valley

top ten

Cybernetic Augmentations

by Bryan Vore



Ninja skills

Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots

After an unflattering appearance in Metal Gear Solid 2, Raiden made a comeback in part 4 with all sorts of cybernetic enhancements including super strength, agility, and the ability to breakdance while holding swords with his feet. This turn as the ultimate cyber ninja brought about his complete redemption from the fanbase.



Everything - *Deus Ex*

The original Deus Ex protagonist, JC Denton started it all with augmentations that enabled seeing through walls, boosted strength, faster running, higher jumping, invisibility, regenerative healing, underwater breathing, enemy stat readouts, and more.



Killstar - *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon*

This Mark-IV Cyber-commando can run faster, breathe underwater, and fall from any height like all the rest, but it's a special attachment to Rex Colt's metallic arm that sets him apart. This ridiculous laser causes so much death and destruction that it's worth the slight drain on his life force.



Super steroids - *Halo*

Unless you dig into Halo's lore, you may not know that Master Chief's powers go beyond his trademark armor. During his Spartan-II training, John-117 underwent chemical and technical augmentations that made him taller, stronger, faster, and more durable, and boosted his reflexes and intelligence.



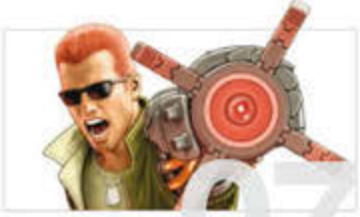
Laser eye - *Mortal Kombat*

The MK series is lousy with cyborgs like Cyrax, Sektor, and Smoke, but the Aussie Terminator was there from the start. After a disfiguring injury from Jax, Kano got a metal plate installed on his face. It's great for enhanced headbutts and the burning lasers that shoot out of his red eye.



A cure for blindness - *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney: Trials & Tribulations*

If you only know one thing about Godot, it's that he's seriously addicted to coffee. A devious poisoning of his brew left him with white hair and blindness. His fancy visor enables him to see again with one limitation: Red doesn't appear on white backgrounds.



Bionic arm

Bionic Commando

After getting his arm blown off fighting for the Federal States of America, Nathan Spencer volunteered for the military's experimental bionic program. The arm's grapple ability allows him to navigate areas quickly, and its super strength grants hard-hitting attacks and enhanced throwing skills.



Gun-Arm

Final Fantasy VII

Barret Wallace lost his arm in defense of his hometown of Corel. With vengeance on his mind he decided to put a gun there instead of a robo-hand. Throughout his quest with Cloud and company he swaps out several attachments like a chainsaw, laser, and bazooka.



Resurrection/Life support

Mass Effect 2

In a shocking twist, Commander Shepard is killed in the opening scenes of Mass Effect 2. The mysterious Illusive Man spent a fortune over two years trying to bring back what he believes is humanity's last hope. It all pays off when Shepard awakens inside a rebuilt body during an attack on the base.



Crazy legs/Arm blade

Xenosaga

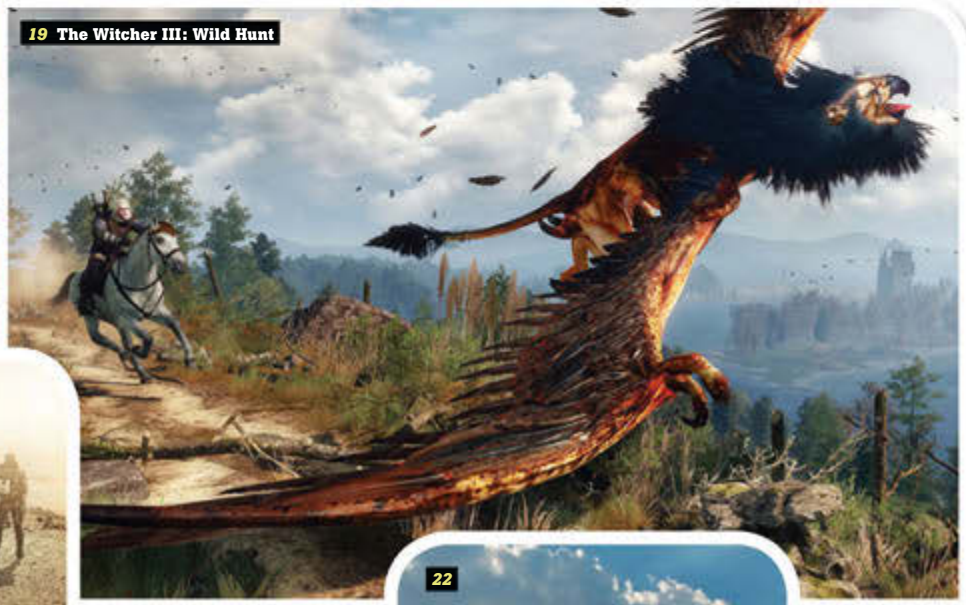
Sorry to bum everyone out again, but Ziggurat 8 or "Ziggy" killed himself after seeing his family murdered. Due to the Life Recycling Act, he was brought back as a cyborg against his will. His powers include rapid kicks, an arm blade attachment, and meteors that shoot out of his feet.


01


05 Wolfenstein: The Old Blood


06


12 Final Fantasy X / X-2 HD Remaster (PS4)


19 The Witcher III: Wild Hunt


15


22


29

May

01 Avengers, Assemble!

Today welcomes what will likely be the highest-grossing film of the year. *The Avengers: Age of Ultron* pits Iron Man, Captain America, Black Widow, Thor, and other tacked-on heroes (Hawkeye) against an evil robot who wants to exterminate humanity. We assume you can only appreciate this subtle and sophisticated plot if you have seen all of the other characters' movies and are current on *Agents of SHIELD* and *Agent Carter*. Reading up on Howard the Duck might help, too.

05 New Releases

› Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Survivor 2 Record Breaker *(3DS)*
› Wolfenstein: The Old Blood *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*

06 Secret Wars Begins

The first two issues of *Secret Wars*, Marvel Comics' universe-upending event, ship this month, with covers by the great Alex Ross. This eight-issue story will lead into a dramatically different Marvel universe, one that at long last merges all of their continuities into something called Battleworld. What does this mean for characters existing in multiple continuities? We'll have to wait and see.

07 New Releases

› Not a Hero *(PC)*

12 New Releases

› Final Fantasy X / X-2 HD Remaster *(PS4)*

14 New Releases

› Knights of Pen & Paper II *(PC)*
› Legions of Steel *(PC)*

15.1 Mad Max Returns

It's been 30 years since *Mad Mad Beyond Thunderdome*, the third entry in a series that set the bar for post-apocalyptic movies. Series creator George Miller teams with Tom Hardy and Charlize Theron to reenergize this long-dormant franchise with *Mad Max: Fury Road*. Expect to see cars explode, maniacs howl, and cars explode again.

15.2 New Releases

› Starlight Drifter *(PC)*

19 New Releases

› Hyperdimension Neptunia U: Action Unleashed *(Vita)*
› The Witcher III: Wild Hunt *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*

22 Journey To Tomorrow

Pixar great Brad Bird teams with Lost scribe Damon Lindelof for today's theatrical release, *Tomorrowland*. This film, which takes its name from Disney's forward-looking theme park area, stars George Clooney, Britt Robertson, and Hugh Laurie. The plot is being kept under wraps, but we know it is a science-fiction film involving reality shifting. Bird always hits it out of the park, but don't be surprised if Lindelof screws it up in the last 20 minutes.

26 New Releases

› Hatsune Miku: Project Mirai DX *(3DS)*
› Lord of Magna: Maiden Heave *(3DS)*
› Magicka 2 *(PS4, PC)*
› Ride *(PS3, 360, PC)*

29 The People's Chopper

Today's big theatrical release, *San Andreas*, stars Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson as the pilot of a rescue helicopter. He has lots of work to do, since California is being destroyed by constant earthquakes. Finding the silver lining in this situation might seem difficult, but think of it this way: With Hollywood falling into giant chasms, it can't churn out any more disaster movies.

2015



A MAN

» PLATFORM
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» PUBLISHER
Square Enix

» DEVELOPER
Eidos-Montreal

» RELEASE
TBA

NO LONGER WHOLE

DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED

After surviving a catastrophic terrorist attack, Adam Jensen returns to a world crippled by strife. A fraction of the planet's wealthy elite control the majority of the globe's flow of money and technology, keeping the marginalized members of society under their corporate heel. Jensen joins a covert, government-sponsored task force that outfits him with a fresh array of transhuman augmentations in order to combat a new breed of terrorism that has arisen in the midst of this new world order. He's better equipped than ever to tackle the challenges laid out before him – which is good, because the last time Jensen tried to save the world, he failed.

BY BEN REEVES



LIVING UP TO A LEGACY

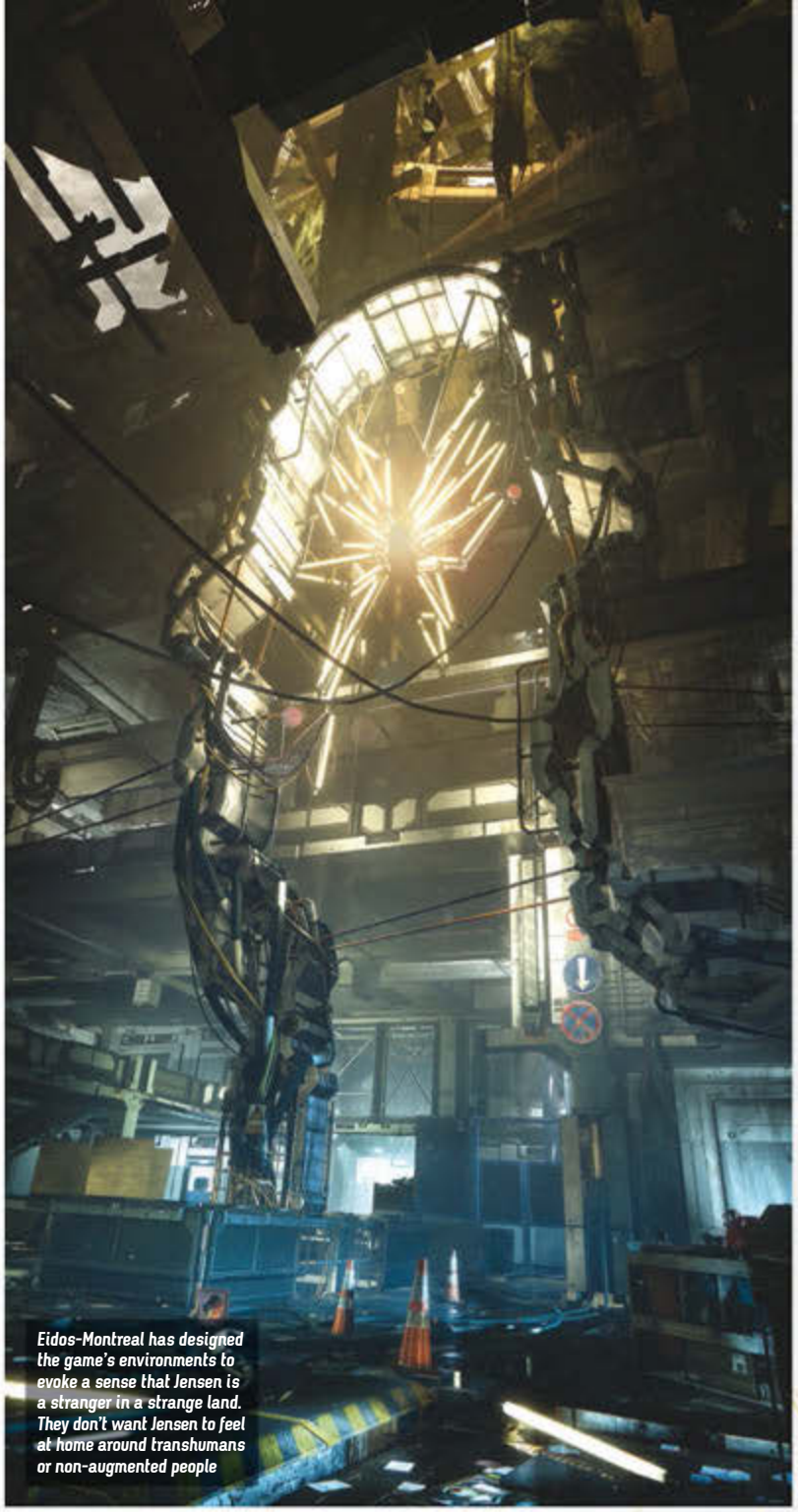
Games that bear the Deus Ex name are judged by high standards. The original cyberpunk shooter, developed by Ion Storm under the leadership of legendary game designer Warren Spector, was a fresh blend of shooter and RPG mechanics. Released in 2000, the game was praised for its immersive sci-fi setting and open-ended gameplay choices. It quickly shot to the top of several industry "best of" lists, and developed a rabid following of enthusiastic fans. Any developer who tried to step into that legacy and deliver another game under the same banner would be evaluated with an extremely tall measuring stick.

No one knows this better than Jean-François Dugas. When Dugas was offered the opportunity to help found Eidos' new Montreal studio in 2007 with the intention of developing a new Deus Ex title, he agonized over accepting the job for six weeks. It wasn't that Dugas didn't like Deus Ex – he loved Deus Ex. Still, he had a comfortable career working for Ubisoft, directing franchises like Far Cry and Rainbow Six. He struggled with whether or not he had anything new or fresh to bring the Deus Ex franchise.

"The first Deus Ex made you feel clever," says Dugas, now Eidos-Montreal's executive game director. "It could make you think while entertaining you. I remember one moment early in the game where you had the option to go into the lady's restroom. If you did, later on someone would comment on that. That was one of the first times in a game where I felt that I existed inside another universe. Some games feel like they don't care about you, but with Deus Ex you felt like what you did mattered."

For the kind of guy who agonizes over whether or not to take a job for six weeks, bringing one of the original shooter/RPG hybrids into the modern era was a stressful experience filled with many sleepless nights. Dugas and his team spent four years prototyping and building a prequel





Eidos-Montreal has designed the game's environments to evoke a sense that Jensen is a stranger in a strange land. They don't want Jensen to feel at home around transhumans or non-augmented people

FIGHTING FOR TIME

Deus Ex: Human Revolution was criticized for its boss fights, which betrayed Deus Ex's open-ended nature and forced players into combat. However, those battles weren't designed by Eidos-Montreal; in order to make sure that the game released on time, the studio outsourced those boss fights to a different company. Still, Eidos doesn't think gamers should blame anyone else for these lackluster set pieces.

"The boss-fight issue was something that we were aware of, and we tried to mitigate by making the bosses easier," says executive game director Jean-François Dugas. "This is where we failed. It was always in the plans to allow players to approach the bosses in a number of different ways – to be stealthy, to go full combat, nonlethal, hacking – that was always in the plans for Human Revolution. So for us, it wasn't a discovery that 'Oh my God, people don't like the boss fights!' It was never our intent to do them the way we did them. However, in the game's Missing Link DLC, we fixed that issue, allowing players to approach boss battles any way they wanted, and we're designing the boss encounters in Mankind Divided the same way."

to the original Deus Ex that expanded on the series touchstones of stealth gameplay, first-person shooting, and social conversations. All this was served up to players through an open-ended gameplay structure that encouraged exploration. Fortunately, Dugas' sleepless nights paid off. Deus Ex: Human Revolution was such a critical and commercial success that it overshadowed Ion Storm's own underwhelming sequel, Deus Ex: Invisible War. Some fans argued that Human Revolution might not have surpassed the original game's vision, but with Eidos-Montreal's second outing, Mankind Divided, Dugas aims to create the most ambitious Deus Ex to date.



THE ROAD TO REDEMPTION

Near the end of Deus Ex: Human Revolution, Adam Jensen witnesses a terrorist attack that changes the course of human history. After spending most of the game sniffing out clues that point to a secret cabal called the Illuminati, Jensen finds himself in the midst of a global conspiracy centered on transhuman biologic implants. The Illuminati activate a signal that causes transhumans across the globe to go insane – triggering a fight-or-flight response that compels them to attack anyone nearby. The signal is only active for a few moments, but the disaster leaves a lot of people scarred – both physically and mentally.

After the attack, Jensen infiltrates a geo-engineering plant called Panchaea, which was built to curb the tide of global warming and just happens to be funded with Illuminati interests. Aboard Panchaea, Jensen discovers the truth behind the attacks, which the press has already labeled the Aug Incident. At this point, players were faced with a choice that affects the end of the game: They can reveal the messy truth to the public, manipulate the evidence to suit their own purposes, or try to cover up the incident in the interest of global peace.

Eidos-Montreal says it won't comment on which ending it considers to be canon. In fact, the team is trying to string together elements from each of Human Revolution's endings to create the cultural backdrop for Mankind Divided. However, in the official Deus Ex lore, Panchaea was destroyed and crashed into the Arctic Ocean. In the wake of this disaster, augmented people were blamed for this "terrorist attack," kicking off a cultural broil. Transhumans quickly came to be seen as second-class citizens, and were segregated from the rest of society. Eidos-Montreal refers to this as the mechanical apartheid, and was heavily inspired by films like *Disctrict 9*, which explored many of the same themes of forced eviction and xenophobia.

"Extremists exist both on the fringes of society and the highest echelons of power," says executive narrative director Mary DeMarle. "The mechanical apartheid has marginalized augmented peoples from the rest of society, creating a struggle for survival. Jensen feels responsible for the events that took place in Human Revolution and, in many ways, this is a story of redemption for him."

To achieve that redemption, Jensen believes that he needs to cut off the head of the shadowy organization that's been pulling society's strings. The Aug Incident was a tragedy, but for the Illuminati it was an opportunity. Jensen can sense this mysterious force slowly consolidating its power and pushing its own agenda.

Unfortunately, the last time Jensen tried to go against the Illuminati, a giant floating installation blew up in his face. In order to gain access to the resources he needs, Jensen joins Task Force 29, a new branch of Interpol designed to cut augmentation-based terrorism off at the knees. This

WHAT'S A TRANSHUMAN?

In the world of Deus Ex, transhuman is a blanket term used to describe anyone who's received a cybernetics implant. This can range from something as complex as having a limb or internal organ replaced with a mechanical transplant to something as simple as receiving a cochlear hearing implant. While some people have willingly decided to have these surgeries, in many cases these procedures were performed on people – such as soldiers or car accident victims – who would have died without the implants.



JENSEN'S VTOL PILOT
ELIAS CHIKANE





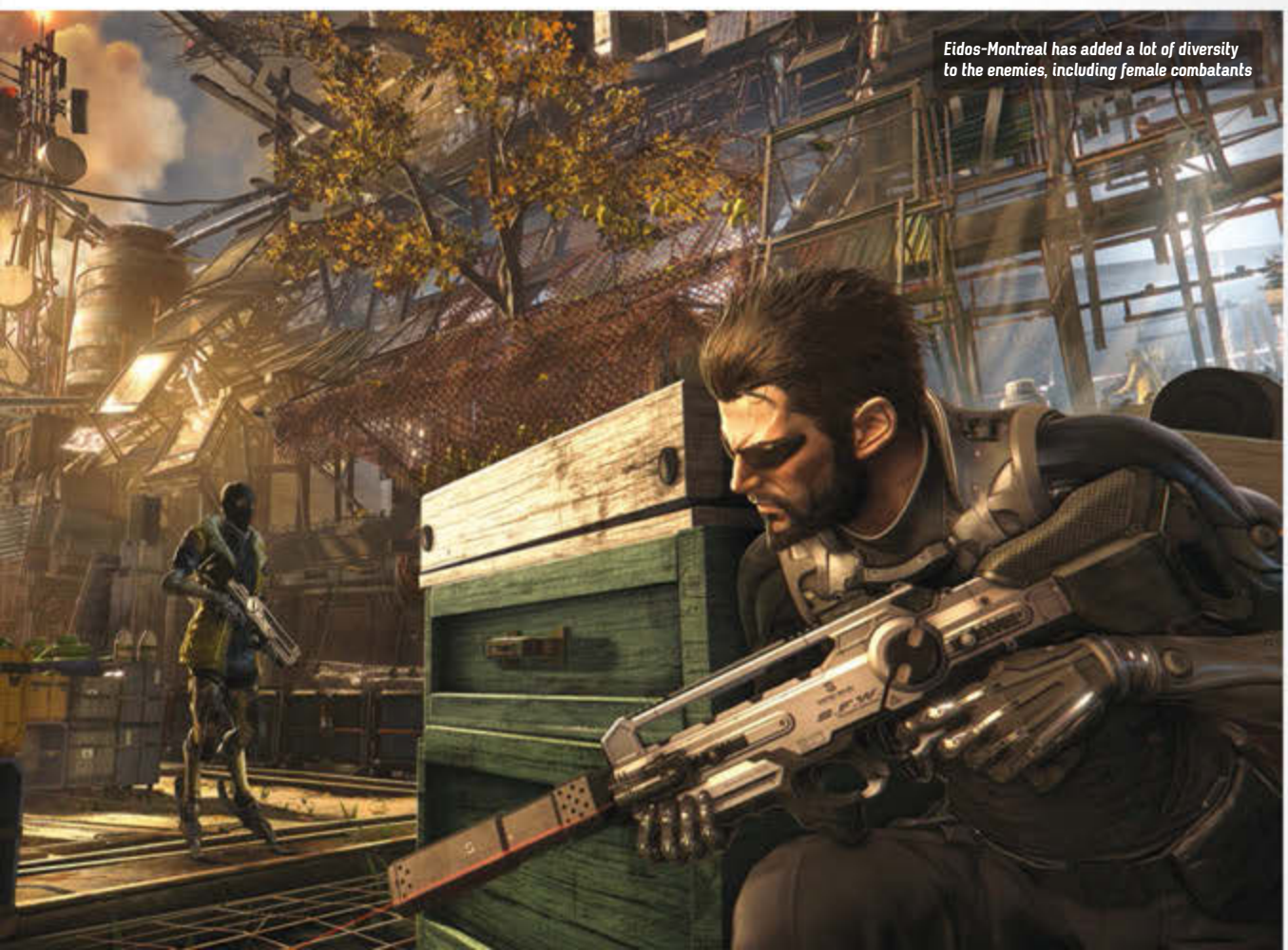


government-sponsored group gives Jensen access to a new array of augmentations and weapons, and starts sending Jensen on a series of field missions that he hopes will eventually lead him closer to the Illuminati. But even with Interpol paying his medical bills, Jensen's loyalties are divided.

The newly minted government agent isn't sure whom he can trust, so while running missions with Task Force 29, Jensen also feeds intel to another covert organization called the Juggernaut Collective. This group of loosely affiliated hackers, activists, and international spies are attempting to expose the Illuminati and their manipulations, and Jensen believes that they might have information that will be instrumental to his mission.

"The Juggernaut Collective is a group of people who have long known the Illuminati are out there," DeMarle says. "We call them hacktivists, but it's not just hackers. It's also ex-special forces and other people with means who've realized that the truth is out there. If we were to take Mulder from *The X-Files* and stick him in there, it's those kinds of people."

In true Deus Ex fashion, The Juggernaut Collective and Task Force 29 often give Jensen conflicting mission goals, and neither faction can be completely trusted. Jensen must behave like a double agent and carefully consider with which party he'll ultimately side. Working two investigations at once, Jensen must decide who to trust and what to believe – even when it seems like everyone is lying to him. However, these two organizations aren't the only things fighting for Jensen's time; the world is full of people in need.



Eidos-Montreal has added a lot of diversity to the enemies, including female combatants

MAKING SIDE QUESTS MEANINGFUL

Plenty of games are filled with side quests, but usually a side quest is just that: a quest a player can complete outside the main story. Mankind Divided is full of these optional activities, but some of them may impact a playthrough of the main story. For example, if players choose to make a deal with a criminal organization early in the game, that mob boss might call in a favor later asking them to do something that interrupts Jensen's main mission. If players interact with an NPC early on, there's a good chance that they will run into that character again at some point down the road and witness the repercussions of their interaction.

"If a character tells you they are at risk in helping you, that doesn't mean anything if that character doesn't come back later and explain the consequences you imposed on them," says executive game director Jean-François Dugas. "I don't want to include fetch quests where you just walk up to somebody and they say, 'Hey, I need five pints of milk. Can you go get them for me, because my son has disappeared and I need milk?' And then you go for the milk and come back and that's the end of the story. For us, I see these extra quests as a way to explore the main themes of the game more deeply. I see side quests as mini stories that feed into the main story."

THE MEGA MAN

The basic concepts behind Human Revolution's augmentation system remain the same for Mankind Divided. Players still find and receive praxis kits that allow them to unlock new augmentations, and experience points can be used to upgrade those augmentations. Mankind Divided features twice as many augmentations as Human Revolution, including tech abilities for combat, stealth, hacking, and social interactions. Here's a quick breakdown of just a few of Jensen's tech tricks.



Tesla

Similar to a Taser, little darts pop out of Jensen's knuckles, allowing him to tag nearby enemies and disable them silently. Players can upgrade this augment to take out up to four enemies at once.

C.A.S.I.E.

This augmentation allows Jensen to analyze the mental state of targeted individuals. The C.A.S.I.E. implant analyzes the behavior patterns of conversation subjects and provides psychological data, which will help Jensen choose the right responses to drive the conversation to fit his needs.

Titan Shield

This nanotechnology-based shield turns Jensen into a walking tank. This augmentation surrounds Jensen's body in a thin layer of tough particles that greatly reduce the damage he takes from enemy fire, allowing players to take additional risks until their energy bar depletes.

Icarus Landing System

Another returning augmentation from Human Revolution, this system allows Jensen to fall from great heights without taking damage. In Mankind Divided, this can be upgraded to allow Jensen to dash horizontally, helping him to put distance between him and his foes or cover gaps in the floor.

Silent Run

This feature allows Jensen to move quickly across any floor without making a sound. This can be combined with cloaking to make Jensen a complete ghost.

Mark-and-Track System

Another vision upgrade, the mark-and-track system lets Jensen tag enemies and monitor their movements throughout a level similar to Far Cry's tracking system. This augmentation also allows Jensen to get a glimpse of the contents of an enemy's pockets. Jensen can combine the mark-and-track system with smart vision to see what enemies are holding through walls.

Smart Vision

Much like Batman's detective vision in the Arkham games, this augmentation allows Jensen to see enemies through walls. Unfortunately, it consumes a fair amount of energy, so players might not want to use it for long periods of time.

PEPS Gun

Another nonlethal weapon, Jensen's bionic fist pops down, revealing a barrel in his arm that releases a concussive blast, knocking enemies off their feet. Afterward, Jensen has the opportunity to walk up to his incapacitated foes and steal their weapon, kill them, or flee before they recover.

Nano Blade

Jensen used this blade in Human Revolution for takedowns. In Mankind Divided, Jensen can still use this in close combat, but now he can also fire off these blades and hit enemies from a distance. Like a powerful crossbow, Jensen can pin enemies to the wall. An upgrade for the blade allows Jensen to charge up this attack so that it explodes into a shower of tiny fractals that can take out a small room of enemies.



STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND

One of Deus Ex: Mankind Divided's early missions sends Jensen to a facility on the outskirts of Prague called Utulek Station. Originally built as temporary housing for Prague's working class, Utulek Station quickly evolved into an internment camp for transhumans.

"Prior to the Aug Incident, Prague was a very progressive city, welcoming augmented people from all over the world," DeMarle says. "The Prague government actually offered incentives for augmented workers, but then the Aug Incident happened. It left a huge scar on the minds of the people, and the government became very reactionary. It became the Aug ghetto. It took that complex and turned it into an area where you have to live if you're an Aug. It's not quite a concentration camp, but if you're undocumented and you're augmented, you will be sent there."

Task Force 29 has been tracking the movements of an organization called the Augmented Rights Coalition. Popular media has branded ARC a terrorist organization, and Interpol wants Jensen to infiltrate Utulek Station and extract ARC's figurehead, a man named Talos Rucker. A humanitarian aid worker to transhumans who also happens to be augmented, Rucker saw the oppression



Talos Rucker was a humanitarian aid worker who quickly became a symbol for oppressed transhumans all over the world

and social injustice imposed on transhumans, and became vocal about how society has mistreated those like himself.

"ARC is presented as this terrorist organization," Dugas says, "but when you actually go to Utulek Station and talk to some of their members, you'll see that they're doing what they feel they need to do to fight for augmented rights. They're trying to grow their own food and give it to the population, they're striking deals with the police to try to get more medicine, and they're trying to ensure safety for those who are marginalized and augmented. So, from a certain point of view, this group is a terrorist group; from another point of view, those people are the only people fighting for their rights."

Jensen's plane drops him off near one of Utulek Station's social hubs. Shops line the streets, some of them selling fresh fruit, others mechanical knickknacks and tools. Jensen looks up and sees temporary housing units stacked one on top of another, reaching toward the sky. Even though Jensen can see patches of sky through gaps in the structure, Utulek Station gives off an imposing sense of claustrophobia. Electrical cables and pipes wind their way throughout the city's streets, and a tower of monitors at the city center displays the news. In one corner, we see a group of police officers arresting a young transhuman; they derogatorily refer to him as a clank. In another section of the city, people complain that there isn't enough food. Utulek Station feels like a city inside a building, and it's not surprising that the complex's low-rent nature has earned it the nickname Golem City.

The European Union presents Golem City as a place where augmented people can be together and be safe, but the police control the city's flow of Neuropozyne – a drug that transhumans need to keep their body from rejecting the mechanical implants under their skin. Golem City officials create an artificial shortage of this drug, and use it to control the residents. Jensen passes by a doctor who elaborates on this plight, and she asks him to keep a lookout for any extra supplies of the drug. Jensen runs into several people in areas like this that offer side quests and other opportunities to further explore the world. But Jensen doesn't have time for that now; he has a terrorist to hunt down.

Jensen pushes deeper into Golem City, hoping to uncover clues that will lead him to Rucker, but Deus Ex missions rarely ever follow a linear path. At this point, Jensen can choose to meet up with one of his informants, but the police have taken this informant in for questioning. If Jensen chooses to butter up the informant's wife, she might give him some clues that point to where Rucker is hiding, or she might tell him how to get in touch with her husband. However, if Jensen causes a scene with the police, the informant's wife will run off and he'll lose that opportunity. In that case, Jensen can sneak into the informant's house and hack his laptop to gain a bead on Rucker's location. Alternatively, Jensen could bypass this area of the game altogether and stumble upon a shortcut to ARC's hideout on his own.

"Depending on how you play it, you can go through Golem City without talking to anybody, or you could talk to everybody and avoid combat and find some hidden storage areas with goodies you might want to use," Dugas says. "You can go full combat or full stealth throughout any part of the game."

After learning to navigate the streets of Golem City, Jensen finally has a handle on Rucker's location. He's ready to infiltrate ARC's facilities and complete his mission. Unfortunately, there are a lot of men with guns standing between him and Rucker. Thankfully, Jensen is good at dodging bullets.

THE ORIGINAL GOLEM CITY

The design of Mankind Divided's Golem City is based on the real-life locale Kowloon Walled City. This approximately six-acre superstructure once housed over 30,000 people within an area of only a few city blocks. Originally a Chinese military fort, this walled district's population spiked after World War II. Infamously controlled by Hong Kong Triads, the city was a hotbed for gamblers, prostitutes, and drug dealers. The district's lack of regulations allowed its residents to continually build on top of existing structures, creating a hodgepodge infrastructure that was so complicated sunlight rarely reached its lower levels. The walled city was featured in films like *Bloodsport* and Jackie Chan's *Crime Story*, and has been depicted in games like Shenmue II and Call of Duty: Black Ops. While the Kowloon Walled City was demolished and turned into a park in the late '80s, the city continues to inspire popular fiction.

RAIDING GOLEM CITY

One of the most efficient ways to complete any objective is to ensure that your opponents aren't even aware of your existence. Jensen has plenty of tools that help him ghost through his world, and he puts several of them to good use as he journeys through the Augmented Rights Coalition headquarters.

"Our goal wasn't to reinvent the wheel, but to build on the foundations we established in Human Revolution," Dugas says. "With stealth, we felt that if it wasn't broke, why fix it? We felt like what we had was pretty solid. Our stealth was praised as being really efficient and immersive."

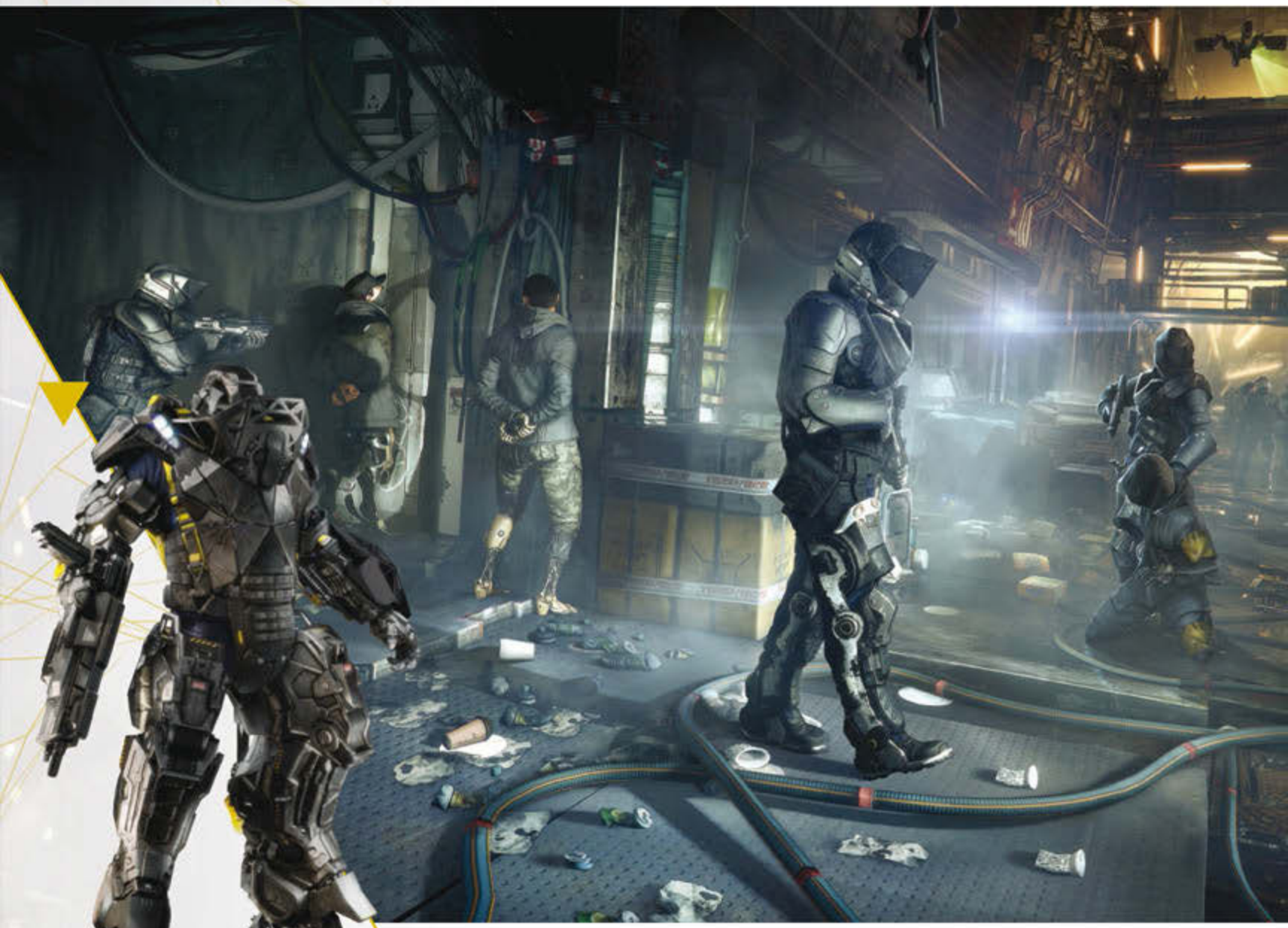
Inside ARC's headquarters, the first thing Jensen does is pull up his augmentation wheel and assign a few Aug abilities to the quick select on the d-pad. The augmentation wheel is a new feature that streamlines the game's controls and makes it easier for Jensen to use his mechanical gifts. Another change to the system is how augmentations consume energy. Inspired by Arkane Studio's Dishonored, Mankind Divided's augmentations consume a fixed amount of energy, but when Jensen stops using them, he regains a portion of that lost power. Jensen can refill his reserves completely with bio cells, but Eidos-Montreal hopes this recharging mechanic encourages players to use their augmentations more liberally.

Entering a kind of makeshift workout area, Jensen activates his smart vision, which allows him to see enemies through walls. Combining this ability with a mark-and-track augmentation allows Jensen to see the loot each enemy is carrying and track their general movements. Jensen moves silently around a boxing ring and does a double takedown with his arm-mounted nano blade. A few more guards stand between Jensen and his destination, but they don't all need to end up in a pool of their own blood. Jensen uses his new remote-hack augmentation to activate a ladder that drops down, opening up a shortcut through the vents of the ARC complex. After stealthily navigating the living quarters and the operations area, Jensen slinks into Rucker's office.

Rucker isn't surprised to see Jensen, but he is grateful that he left most of his men alive. Jensen tells him that he is being taken in for questioning, but Rucker is hesitant. ARC is a peacekeeping organization, and Rucker believes that if he comes with Jensen, the government will make him "disappear."

Much like the rest of the game, the outcome of pivotal conversations like this one is based on player choice. In one playthrough, Rucker might get frustrated with Jensen and push an emergency button under his desk, forcing Jensen into a fight. In another, Rucker might agree to come with Jensen and even turn over a security card that gives him access to Rucker's personal safe.

Our demo lands somewhere between these two options. After a heated debate about the merits of pacifism, Rucker asks Jensen to delay his arrest for a day so he



can get his things in order. When Jensen presses him further, Rucker admits that he thinks certain members within ARC may be less committed to his peaceful ideals. Rucker believes that he has a terrorist inside his organization. But before Rucker can say much more, his body goes rigid. The augmentations in his chest and arms send him into convulsions before the electronics themselves start coming apart at the seams. Rucker is dead by the time his body hits the floor.

It seems that someone was listening in on Jensen's conversation and didn't like what they heard. It's worth an investigation, but Jensen has more pressing concerns. Rucker made a great deal of noise when he expired, which alerted his bodyguards. Jensen activates his smart vision. On the other side of the door, he can see the heat signatures of a small security force. The team lines up, weapons ready, and then applies a blowtorch to the lock on Rucker's door.



The Augmented Rights Coalition was formed to fight for transhuman rights. It's a peaceful organization, but Task Force 29 thinks that there might be a terrorist in their midst



Golem City was originally a temporary housing complex built for Prague's working class, but has become a slum for transhumans in the wake of the Aug Incident

THE BURNING QUESTIONS

Will my Human Revolution save carry over to this game?

Eidos-Montreal didn't know if it would get another shot at a Deus Ex title while working on Human Revolution, so it didn't have much time to plan for the future of the series. For that reason – and the fact that the studio is migrating to a new generation of console hardware – fans shouldn't expect Mankind Divided to read their Human Revolution saves and deliver any narrative payoffs or gameplay boosts. However, that might change in the future.

"We are planning for a franchise now," says executive game director Jean-François Dugas. "We are planning a big story arc. For Human Revolution we were just trying to survive and make a decent Deus Ex game. It was a one-shot deal, but we ended up making a strong main character. Now we want to take care of that franchise and those characters, expanding on them over time through more games and through other means. So what you'll see in this game might not be the end of it all. There might be things in here that don't necessarily pay off today, but will pay off someday."

What was that about a Deus Ex MMO?

When Eidos-Montreal first filed a trademark for Deus Ex Universe, many fans speculated that the studio was planting seeds for a new sci-fi MMO. In a company blog post, studio head David Anfossi explained that, "The concept behind Deus Ex: Universe is to create an ongoing, expanding, and connected game world built across a generation of core games," which only helped fuel speculation that Deus Ex fans would soon be logging into servers and playing with their friends in a massive Deus Ex world. In truth, Eidos has no plans for a Deus Ex MMO. The Deus Ex: Universe was simply Eidos-Montreal's label for cross-media promotions such as books, graphic novels, and mobile apps.

Is this still a prequel to the original Deus Ex?

The original Deus Ex was set in the fictional future of 2052. With Human Revolution, Eidos-Montreal explored events 25 years before the first game. Mankind Divided takes place only two years after those events, in the year 2029. But as the Eidos-Montreal team continues to explore Deus Ex's past, will it become harder for the two stories to link together under the same timeline? Executive narrative director Mary DeMarle believes that the story they are telling is still building to events that take place in the original game.

"I love stories that take something you know and reinterpret it," DeMarle says. "We are very aware of the original Deus Ex games and we do continually look back to them, and we consider that the future, but I also like the idea that the past is interpreted by people who live in the future. With Mankind Divided, we are exploring the original game's past, so is the depiction of past events from the original Deus Ex true? Or in our route to get there will we discover stuff we never knew?"

AUGED AND LOADED

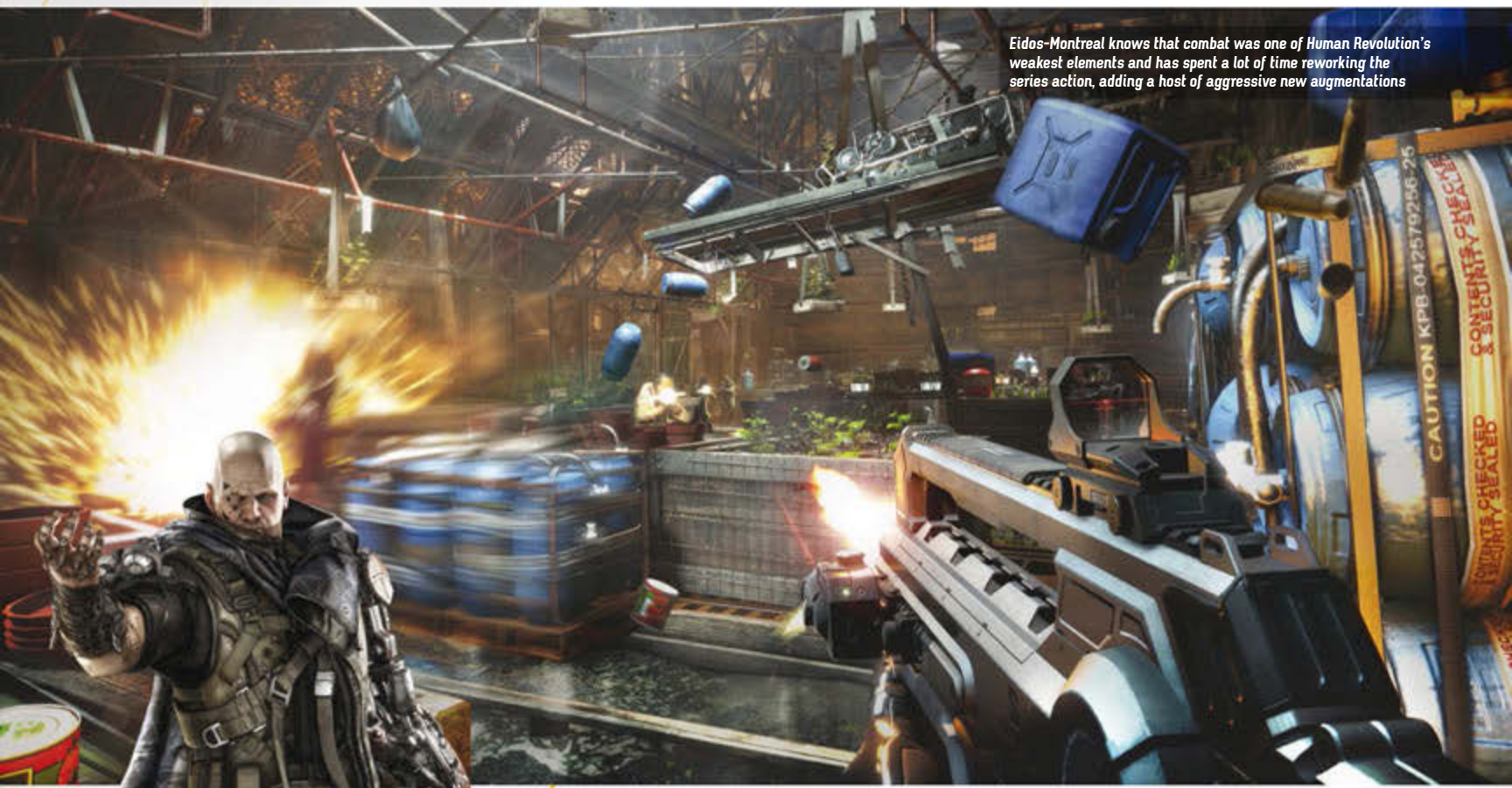
Eidos-Montreal received some interesting feedback from the fans of Human Revolution: Players who preferred stealth tended to enjoy the game more than those who opted for combat. The studio realizes that combat was the weakest part of Human Revolution and has spent the last couple years iterating on its gunplay, pushing combat to become as rewarding and entertaining as stealth. The results are immediately apparent. Mankind Divided's action plays out like a series of set-piece moments, which is all the more striking when you consider that most of the action isn't scripted.

As Rucker's security detail prepares to bash through the door, Jensen takes stock. He looks down at the rifle in his hand and a weapon's setting overlay pops onscreen. At any point during the action, Jensen can press a button and adjust his weapon settings. Even in the heat of battle, Jensen can change ammo type, switch a gun's firing pattern, affix a new scope, or adjust any number of weapon-specific settings. Jensen removes the silencer, clicks his assault rifle over to full auto, and hot swaps some more aggressive augmentations to his quick select; he's tired of being stealthy.

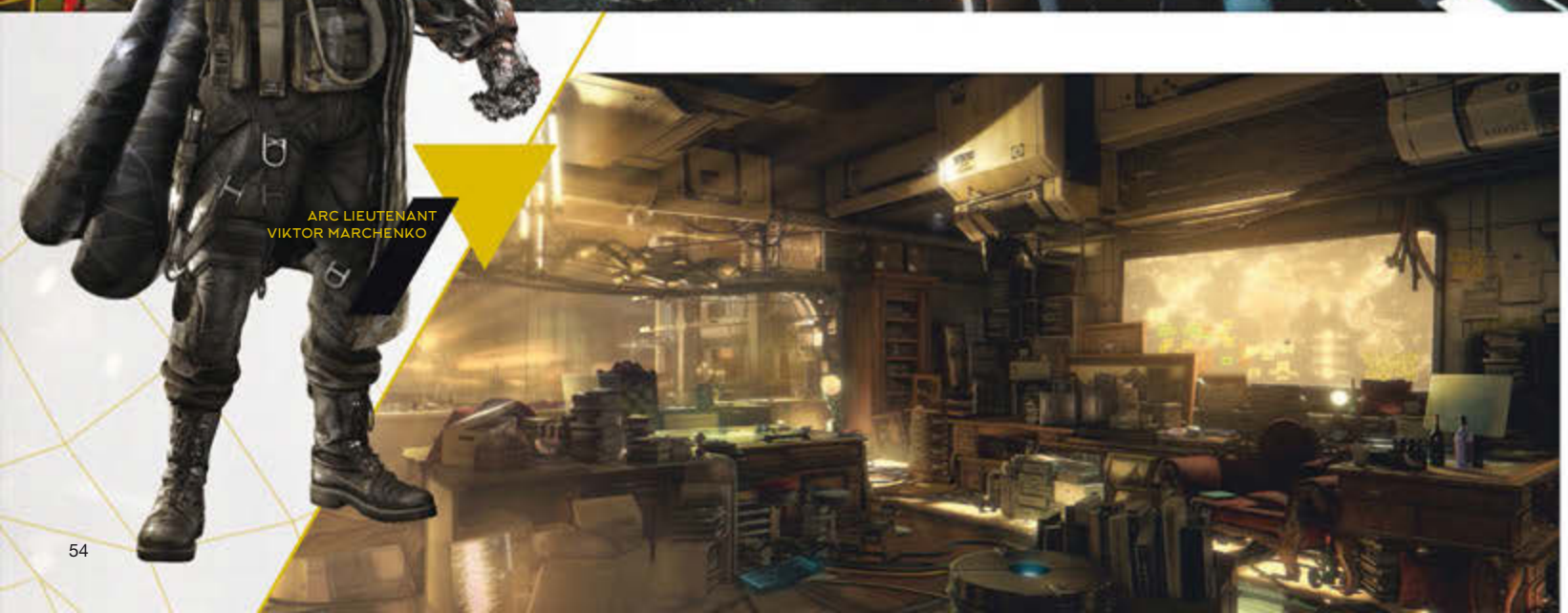
Rucker's door opens in a tiny explosion, and a couple of smoke grenades fill the room with gas. Jensen unloads into the fog. He doesn't have to be cautious, because he's activated his Titan nano shield augmentation. Bullets ping off his chest like hail on the hood of a car. This is just one example of Jensen's new suite of combat augmentations.

"We wanted to provide Jensen with more aggressive augmentations," Dugas says. "We wanted to give him augmentations that allow him to take more risks and be a little more daring, to dive into the heat of battle without fearing death. We hope to encourage players to be more audacious and engage in combat."

This security team doesn't stand much of a chance against a walking tank. As the



Eidos-Montreal knows that combat was one of Human Revolution's weakest elements and has spent a lot of time reworking the series action, adding a host of aggressive new augmentations



ARC LIEUTENANT
VIKTOR MARCHENKO



At any time, players can pull up a weapon's customization overlay and switch their ammo type or firing pattern

game progresses, some enemies start to use Jensen's own tricks against him. Given the cultural stance on augmentations, many police forces have started exploring external technologies such as exoskeletons and mechs that allow their users to perform many of the same superheroics as an augmented soldier. The results are the same: Jensen isn't the only superhero in the game.

"We beefed up the kinds of enemies players will be facing," Dugas says. "Not only do enemies have a variety of guns, but some of them have augments or other high-tech combat tools. Some enemies will have high-jump abilities. Others will have Titan shields of their own. And our A.I. is a lot better at coordinating their strikes, flanking, and constantly forcing players to adapt their strategy on the fly. We're hoping players will have more enticements to use their aggressive tools to get out of these situations."

As Jensen rounds a corner and heads toward his extraction point, he runs into one of these new challenges: a defensive mobile turret. Jensen doesn't have time to waste on this thing. Behind cover, he pulls up his weapon loadout quick select, switches over to armor-piercing rounds, then throws out an EMP grenade – disabling the turret before sending a magazine of ammo through its motherboard. That takes care of one threat, but reinforcements are already closing in on Jensen's location.

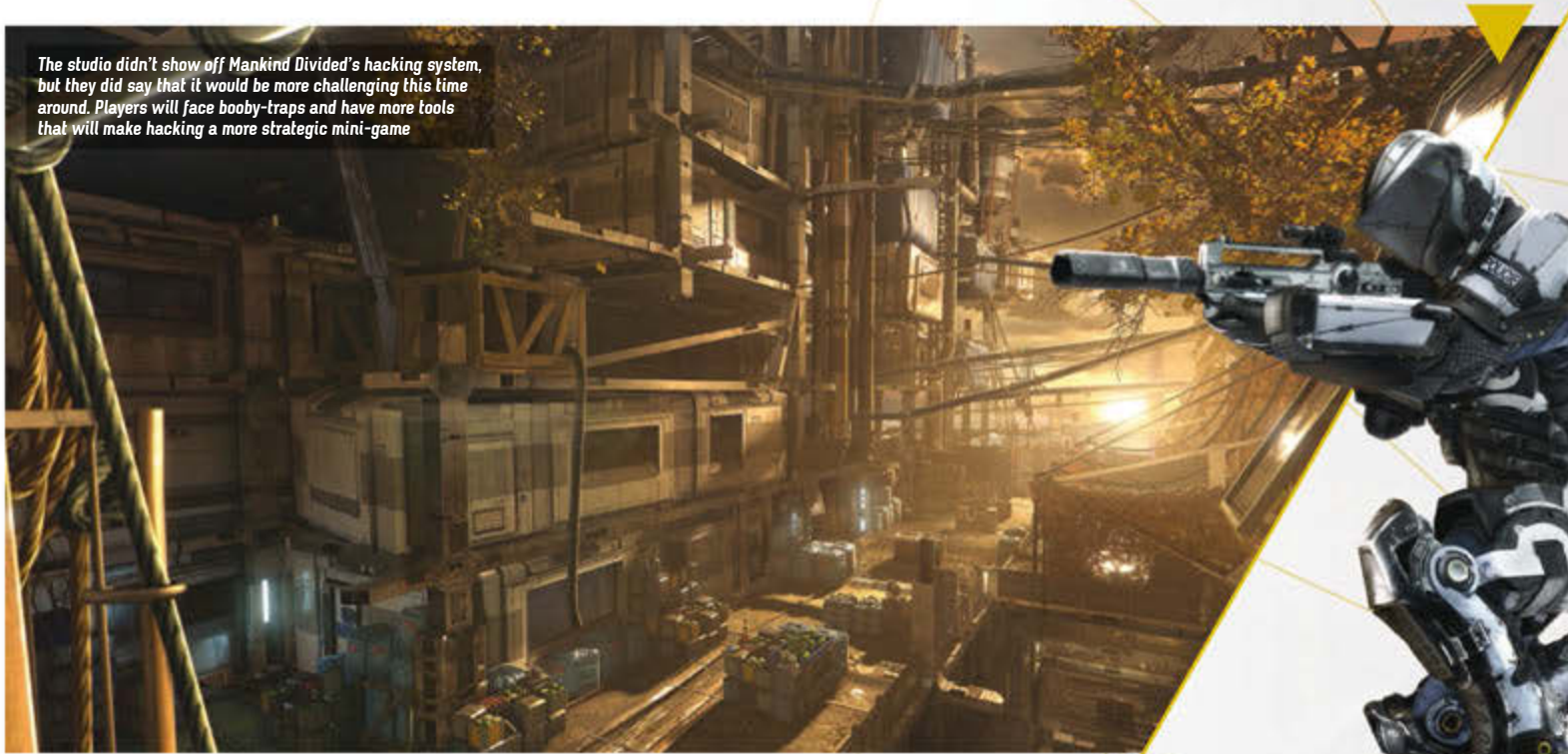
Our super soldier dives into a nearby greenhouse for safety. A holographic image displays his last known position, and Jensen takes advantage of the situation. As enemies begin to converge on the entrance to the greenhouse, Jensen uses his gun to chip away at one of the greenhouse's rafters. Certain elements in the environment now react to combat, and Jensen can use this to his advantage. The wooden rafter finally gives way, splintering and sending a collection of barrels tumbling down on top of his enemy's heads. Amidst the confusion, Jensen dashes toward the window and uses his Icarus propulsion system to boost through the greenhouse's second-story window before landing safely on the street in a shower of glass.

As Jensen runs toward his dropship, several ARC enforcers line him up in their sights. However, before any of them get off a killshot, a burly transhuman steps out from the shadows and makes them lower their weapons. This man is Viktor Marchenko, a muscle-bound enforcer with a massive mechanical arm and a gnarly looking eye augmentation. As Jensen's dropship takes off, he looks back and the two men exchange a knowing stare. Eidos-Montreal wasn't willing to share much about Marchenko, but we know that he was one of Rucker's lieutenants. With ARC's leader out of the picture, could Marchenko soon be in charge? This mysterious figure doesn't seem to want Jensen dead, but few people in the Deus Ex universe can truly be trusted.

As Jensen's transport takes him back to Prague, he gives Golem City one last look. He's stirred up a hornet's nest, and his search to identify the shadowy figures manipulating the world's politics has only left him with more questions. Fortunately, there will be other missions, and Jensen will surely return to Golem City to witness the effects of his time there. But for now, Jensen needs to regroup and plan his next approach.

Humanity has come a long way since rubbing sticks together to create fire. They have pushed human biology to its limit – and then discovered ways to exceed even those limits. Sadly, those advances are now being rejected and a lot of people are being hurt in the process. The future of human evolution is at stake, and Jensen's actions will shape that future.

For a whole month of Deus Ex: Mankind Divided content, including a behind-the-scenes look at the game's art and video features with the team, head to gameinformer.com/deusex


The studio didn't show off Mankind Divided's hacking system, but they did say that it would be more challenging this time around. Players will face booby-traps and have more tools that will make hacking a more strategic mini-game



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»DEVELOPER
n-Space

»RELEASE
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The late '90s were a good time to play PC RPGs, especially if you had affection for the grandfather of role-playing systems, Dungeons & Dragons. Games like Baldur's Gate (1998), Planescape: Torment (1999), and Icewind Dale (2000) were benchmarks for storytelling and epic role-playing, and set the stage for later blockbusters like Dragon Age: Origins. After a long drought, recent years have seen a resurgence of the isometric party-based RPG, with crowdfunding campaigns for titles like Divinity: Original Sin, Torment: Tides of Numenera, Shadowrun Returns, and Pillars of Eternity racking up fan enthusiasm and financial support. However, the D&D role-playing system has been absent from the festivities. Developer n-Space aims to change that. Sword Coast Legends is an ambitious project that offers a clear homage to the great D&D video games of the past, while using modern technology and connectivity to bring players closer than ever before to the experience of laughing, fighting, and creating a communal fantasy story around the table. ***by Matt Miller***

The heart of Sword Coast Legends is a campaign set in the Forgotten Realms fantasy world, which aims to follow in the footsteps of Baldur's Gate, but update characters, gameplay, and technology to current expectations. "I definitely think with all those great classic D&D RPGs, there has been a longing for people to go back to that," says n-Space president Dan Tudge. For years, role-playing games moved to larger scale blockbusters; n-Space wants to return to the style presented in earlier games, but with a modern twist. "We all grew up on those games, and we all love those games, and we want to continue to make those games."

The Forgotten Realms continent of Faerûn is a massive fantasy setting that has been fleshed out and expanded for decades, but the team at n-Space is embracing a return to the same corner of the world that houses previous games. "The Sword Coast has been the center point for so many great games, for Baldur's Gate, Icewind Dale, and Neverwinter Nights," Tudge says. "The opportunity to bring an adventure back there ourselves was just too much to pass up."

The plot focuses on an adventuring guild called the Order of the Burning Dawn. Prior to the events of the game, Burning Dawn is akin to many similar groups that tackle monsters threatening a community, or hunt down long-lost treasure. While accompanying a caravan to the city of Luskan, your guild member suffers a horrific nightmare regarding a demonic threat intent on destroying the world. The next day, your caravan is attacked by mercenaries, and the few survivors learn that the entire Order of the Burning Dawn has been targeted and destroyed. The party sets out for Luskan and becomes embroiled in a plot that extends far beyond your guild's devastation. "Your order is being hunted down and slaughtered, and you have been told that you are evil and you have to figure out why," Tudge says. "It takes you all over the Sword Coast, including down into the Underdark."



The storyline can be tackled alone, where you craft a character from scratch and launch into the adventure, or played cooperatively with up to four players. Your crafted character can be a male or female dwarf, elf, half-elf, halfling, or human. The standard character classes of cleric, fighter, rogue, and wizard are joined by ranger and paladin in the initial release. Character stats are gleaned from a point-buy system.

Companion characters join over time, each with their own goals, talents, personalities, and foibles. N-Space promises a rich system of friendships and relationships, between individual companions, as well as the option to influence and shape your main character's connection to each party member. It's a style of investing players in story that has served BioWare well in game after game. Director Dan Tudge and writer Jay Turner are both veterans of the studio, and bring their expertise to bear at n-Space. "At BioWare, I learned that strong characters go a long way towards making an RPG memorable," Turner says.

If A.I. companions aren't what you're looking for, the entirety of Sword Coast Legends' campaign can also be played cooperatively with up to four players. Everyone brings their own created character into the mix from the beginning of the story, and combat, leveling, and storytelling are revealed to the group as the plot unfolds.

First Companions

N-Space plans for a large cast of characters that join the adventure as it unfolds, and players can choose who to have tag along for each step of the journey. Experience points are shared across all your characters, so no one gets left behind in the leveling process.

"When designing a character with a race and a class, I try and steer left when other people might steer right," says writer Jay Turner. "For example, our dwarf fighter is not a bearded, scar-faced veteran. She's a sweet lady who happens to be an ass kicker when she needs to be. We want to throw some curveballs."

These four individuals offer a glimpse of what to expect.



Jarhild

Your created character won't start the game with many allies on his or her side, but Jarhild is a stalwart warrior to be relied upon. The shield dwarf makes her living as a fighter in the employ of the Order of the Burning Dawn, and is one of its few survivors after a devastating assault. She is strong-willed and cares little what others think of her, and her experience in battle tactics make her an ideal warrior for the front lines, even while her personality outside of combat is endearing.



Illydia

The moon-elf cleric is an adherent of the elven goddess of the moon and hunt, Sehanine Moonbow. At 140 years old, she's still in her prime as an elf, but her wisdom and experience set her apart from her companions. A talented archer in her own right, Illydia travels with the dwarf Larethar, and the two come to the player's aid during the initial mercenary caravan attack that might have wiped them out. Illydia chooses to aid the party in the name of redemption; past mistakes haunt her, and there's little doubt her dark history will unfold as the story continues.

DIVING INTO CAMPAIGN

An early glimpse of the game in action gives a good sense of Sword Coast Legends' trajectory. Our demo begins in a dungeon beneath Luskan, as the party surreptitiously makes its way towards the famous Cutlass Inn to uncover the whereabouts of the Ashen Priest, a terrifying being implicated in the attack on the Order of the Burning Dawn. Dungeon areas like this are an amalgamation of procedurally generated and developer-crafted experiences. The team can manipulate certain rooms and encounters to specific parameters, but otherwise the twists and turns of the tunnels are different for each playthrough. As the party explores, a zooming and panning camera shows off the illustrative 3D game world, which is awash with detail, especially on character equipment and weapons.



Spoken banter between the party members adds personality and humor to the dungeon exploration. "It's high stakes, but light mood," Turner says. "If we were to film the adventures of anyone's D&D group, that's what it would be. The meteor's about to hit the Earth, but they're cracking jokes about Mountain Dew in the tavern. We're not that goofy, but the mood is trying to be like a group of people at the table, and what would their characters sound like?"

It's not long before a fight against giant spiders offers a glimpse of combat. When playing solo, battles can be played out in real-time or tackled with a more tactical eye through a pause-and-play option. When playing cooperatively, the adventure always plays out in real-time, since most players will be controlling fewer characters.

The flow of combat is familiar for anyone with a background in isometric RPGs. Simple mouse commands send your party charging off toward a target, while a selection of hotbar skills and spells provide buffs to the party, damage to enemies, and manipulation of the battlefield. Familiar D&D staples like magic missile and fireball are in abundance. Unlike the standard six-second D&D round, Sword Coast Legends opts for speedier interactions, with a standard exchange of blows and spells playing out in about two seconds, lending each fight a more frenetic quality of motion.

After the fight, some new weapon pick-ups take us into the menu. A shared party inventory houses all your treasure and pick-ups, while each character has a fully customizable character sheet. Newly equipped items change the character's appearance. The inventory seems simple and easy to access and make changes, which is just what you want in a game like this.

With new weapons in hand, we get a glimpse of the skill system at work. The giant spider room has no apparent exits. It's not until the rogue goes into an active search mode that the party can escape through a secret door. The action slows down his speed, but a circle extends out from the character (matching his skill level) that can detect hidden features within its radius.

With the exit uncovered, the party emerges onto the streets of Luskan as a light dusting of snow begins to fall from the sky and coat the ground. Townspeople go about their tasks; their presence and activities in any given location will change if we return again later. The system of town life, like the dungeons, is procedurally generated in some locations and set by designers in others. Extensive incidental voice acting is everywhere, lending life to the city.

The information obtained at the Cutlass Inn sends the party off to the slums of Luskan, where they meet up with Sir Banagar. The knight's presence is dependent upon a previous event, in which the player chose to spare his life despite a grave injustice. The mercy has led the knight here, and now we have the option to see him aid the group in upcoming fights; the extra manpower is a big help in a subsequent encounter with a hulking undead ogre.



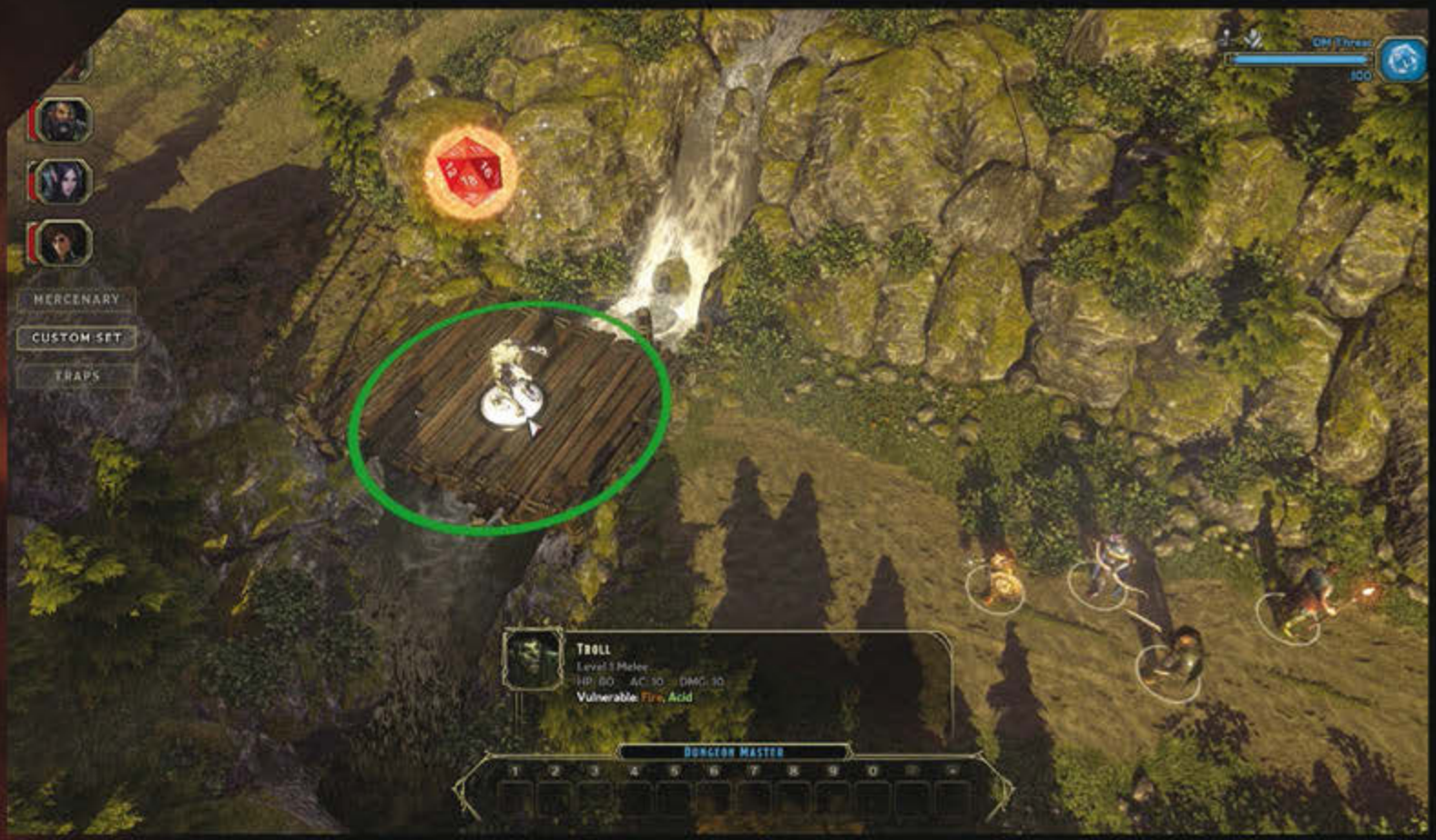
Larethar

The rough-and-tumble Larethar has two personalities at war with themselves. Prior to meeting Illydia, the gold-dwarf rogue was a debaucherous brawler and cutpurse, and evidence of his snide and disagreeable side is regularly on display. However, his recent travels with Illydia have tempered his experience, and made him want to be a better man. His wisecracking and greedy ways are at odds with a desire to be a hero.



Hommet

The human wizard Hommet is an unusual twist on a fantasy staple; he's a necromancer with good intentions. His strange choice of specialty has made it nearly impossible to find a mentor and master who isn't out to unleash an undead plague on the world. Hommet falls in with the survivors of the Burning Dawn massacre for a chance to prove himself.



THE DM EXPERIENCE

At this point, the search for the Ashen Priest takes a turn, as the demo flips from standard campaign play over into dungeon-crawl mode. A new player joins the game in the role of the dungeon master, and within seconds is able to set up a full dungeon of his own specifications, and then manipulate it on the fly as the player continues forward. "We wanted to make sure that people could get in very quickly and start playing as a DM right away and enjoy that experience," Tudge says.

Dungeon crawls start out from a DM's menu screen, where he or she sets up several options from a pull-down menu that establish the starting features of a dungeon. Each floor of your dungeon can have its own independent setup. A selection of general size is further refined by your choice of complexity, which sets how linear or branching the rooms are. Each dungeon floor can include two distinct creature sets, like drow, goblin, or undead, as well as an overall difficulty for the encounters found there. The dungeon master also selects a tile set – like catacombs, sewers, or bandit caves – along with a mood, which alters lighting, fog, and music. Finally, the DM selects quests for the dungeon; these overall objectives give the party a task in your ad hoc creation. "You can meet with your friends at 7:00 on Friday night and say: 'Hey guys, what do you want to play? Do you want to play a gauntlet of death that is just full of zombies? Or do you want to play a very sneaky dungeon that is full of secrets and traps?'. And the DM can set that up very quickly, he can set the quests up, he can drop in his NPCs, do whatever he wants to make that experience, and five minutes later everybody is playing," Tudge describes.



A dungeon master's job doesn't end when he opens his creation for business. Instead, n-Space has crafted a system built to encourage an appropriate challenge for player characters, as well as regular interactions for the DM. While some recent games have explored the idea of four-versus-one play, Sword Coast Legends looks more to the roots of D&D, and aims for a four-with-one style of interaction. DMs are encouraged to challenge players with deadly traps and monsters, but hopefully not repeatedly kill them off. The DM doesn't win by killing the players; like a true tabletop RPG session, the DM wins by encouraging a good time had by all. "That doesn't mean that you can't play adversarial and some players might agree that they want to play an adversarial match with a DM and you can do that, but the whole system has been based around that cooperative vibe of providing a challenge and a great experience," Tudge says.

Any longtime RPG player will tell you just how hard that is to do well, but n-Space has some innovative ideas to make it work. Dungeon masters build a resource called DM threat by challenging players with interesting



encounters, which in turn can be used to alter or create other encounters later in the dungeon. “DM threat is earned by providing a challenge for the players and interacting with the players and then he can spend that threat to spawn monsters, to change encounters, to drop traps and lock doors and make secret areas, and really balancing to provide more challenge for the players,” Tudge says.

Wipe the party, and you lose all your threat. There’s a balancing act around clever trap placement and ambush locations. Spend threat to turn a normal door into a secret one that appears like a normal wall. Lock a chest, or spend additional threat to increase the complexity of the locking mechanism. Promote enemies that need a bigger punch, or demote ones that are too hard, and get a refund of DM threat. DM threat is meant to hold back over-zealous or simply inexperienced dungeon masters from creating impossible set-ups. For instance, there’s a limit on how much threat can be spent in a given room, so you can’t simply save everything up until a big boss and then devastate the team. At the end of encounters, DMs also get loot to spend elsewhere – one-time surprises to throw at your players, like dropping a small horde of zombies into an already tricky fight.

DMs have access to the full map of the dungeon, as well as suggested spawn locations for enemies, which can also be changed on the fly, represented in each room by a large floating d20 at the center of each chamber. A cooperative party of four players is playing in real-time, so a good DM needs to become proficient with working ahead to reshape the dungeon on the fly, and recognize when to push up the challenge, and when to scale things back because the party is about to die. When the game releases, players will be able to rate and describe the style of any given DM, so that players who like more or less traps, puzzles, fights, or other stylistic choices can find the right connections.

More experienced DMs may enjoy the option for a quick dungeon crawl, but be eager for something more robust and creative. N-Space plans to integrate a full suite of campaign creation options that take the experience a step beyond simple ad hoc experiences. While the toolset isn’t quite ready for demoing, the idea is to foster a community of players who are crafting entire adventures and storylines of their own, complete with their own quests and encounter designs. “Campaign creation is much more about allowing for homebrew campaign creation like a tabletop DM would do,” Tudge says. “We want to empower players to create their favorite homebrew campaign, their favorite new campaign, or even recreate their favorite module, and still in a very easy to use way that is also deep and robust as well. “

Several hours spent with Sword Coast Legends leads to a strange impression of simultaneous nostalgia and newness. It’s clear that the team at n-Space has a deep affection for the D&D video games that have come before, but stylish art and smooth game mechanics show that Sword Coast Legends is anything but rooted in the past. And while another campaign through the Forgotten Realms has immense appeal, the possibility of a growing body of fan-crafted and curated fantasy campaigns and adventures is hard to resist. ◆







Rainbow Six Siege

Don't call it a comeback

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Shooter
(10-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Montreal

» **Release**
Fall

Seven years removed from Rainbow Six Vegas 2, we're still waiting for a proper sequel for the popular multiplayer shooter. Things were looking up when we featured the promising Rainbow Six Patriots on our cover in 2011, but after playing musical chairs with the leadership positions, Ubisoft shelved that game and instead committed to another project bearing the Tom Clancy name – Siege. The multiplayer demo at last year's E3 whetted our appetite for the game's unique approach to tactical play, so we headed to Montreal to see how the development has fared since its debut.

Our second rendezvous with Rainbow Six Siege shared many similarities with the first – a hands-on demo of the eponymous Siege mode. This asymmetrical mode pits two teams of five against one another in close-quarters, indoor environments. The defending team must protect the hostage at all costs, while the assaulters try to extract the VIP in less than three minutes. Each player only has one life, so if all of the members of one team die, the round comes to an end. Teams switch sides after each round, and the first team to four wins is victorious.

Before the bullets start flying, both teams have a small window of time to prep for the assault. After choosing where in the environment they want to hole up, the defending team has many tools at its disposal to fortify its surroundings, including barricading doors, reinforcing walls, throwing down barbed wire, and setting up deployable shields.

At the same time, the assaulting team sends in drones to scout the location and reveal the hostage's position. Smart teams move their drones cautiously and position them in inconspicuous places, because the camera feeds can be used by dead players to provide intel to their team during the match. Jumping a drone onto a cluttered couch or sliding one under a bed is a great way to avoid detection; if a defender spots them, they can shoot out your feed.

Once the planning window closes, it's time for the rush. Siege matches find a sweet spot between the frenetic firefights of Call of Duty and the tactics-heavy approach of Counter-Strike. Since you only have one life, your instinct is to move cautiously – but you can't lollygag too much given the three-minute deadline to complete the job.

The two maps we played both demonstrate how important procedural destruction is to the experience. The first is the same house featured in the E3 demo, but this time it's set during the daytime. This allows the defenders to more readily identify where the assaulters are coming from outside and even engage them before they enter the house. Attackers have many breaching options – they can rappel up to the second floor, use the main entrance, come in through the basement, or breach the garage door. Entry points aren't limited to these natural choices – teams can also breach through walls and ceilings. In one match, we blew through the ceiling above the hostage and quickly eliminated the unsuspecting enemies below.

The second map, simply titled "plane," features even tighter quarters than the house. This Air Force One-style aircraft parked on the runway features four entry points for the attackers. You could breach on the upper level of the plane, enter through the front entrance by the presidential meeting rooms, come through the back door by the press seating, or sneak through the cargo hold. Given the tight quarters, vertical battles are more common, with firefights happening up the staircases and ladders or through the floor. Bullets don't change trajectory when firing through the floor, but they deal slightly less damage.

The variety of tactics available for both attackers and defenders makes the Siege







mode highly replayable. "We really wanted a game that's all about exercising player creativity within a sandbox," says game designer Andrew Witts. "The destruction was the first piece of that – bending the environment to your will in terms of breaching and making new opportunities for yourself. But ever since then we've been developing these gadgets and operators with player creativity in mind."

The longer players have to toy with these gadgets, the more clever their deployments are. For instance, savvy attackers may drop a flash charge down immediately after a ceiling breach to blind the defenders, giving the attackers a temporary edge. Another forward-thinking tactic involves detonating the thermite charge and using the operative Sledge to hammer through another wall at the same time. Given the loud noise of the thermite blast, the defenders may not even realize two breach points were created at the same time.

Ubisoft still has much more to share about Siege in the ramp up to its fall release, including details about the player progression, campaign, and other multiplayer modes. If these modes rival the potential emanating from Siege mode, Rainbow Six could make a disruptive return to the multiplayer space.

» **Matt Bertz**



Hello Operators

As with past Rainbow Six games, Siege introduces operatives from counterterrorism units based all around the world – the FBI SWAT, British SAS, Russian Spetsnaz, German GSG9, and French GIGN. But unlike the predecessors, Siege's operatives have been carefully crafted to offer unique special abilities on the battlefield.

"We're designing operators with gameplay and counter gameplay in mind," says game designer Andrew Witts. "We want it to be a balanced, fun game for both sides. We don't want it to ever be one operator to rule them all or one roster to rule them all. We want there to be interesting converstations about who is the best but not so much 'Oh this is definitively the best.' It's all about using our basic siege gameplay pillars and building these operatives from that."

Here are the 10 operatives featured in the closed alpha. Ubisoft plans to have at least 20 when the game releases this fall.

ASSAULT

Ash: A SWAT vet, Ash can fire a breach charge from a distance.

Sledge: This SAS member can punch through destructible surfaces with his sledgehammer.

Thatcher: This SAS specialist makes his money disabling electronics with an EMP blast.

Thermite: A demolitions expert, this SWAT member can breach reinforced walls.

Twitch: This GIGN operative uses a special drone that can send a shock charge to disable traps and deal small amounts of damage to defenders.

DEFENDERS

Castle: A SWAT defense specialist who can place barricades in doors and windows that can sustain more damage than the regular fortifications.

Mute: This SAS member can place jamming devices to prevent remote detonation and disrupt drone signals.

Pulse: A heartbeat monitor makes this SWAT member a valuable defender.

Rook: This gregarious GIGN member has several armored vests that his teammates can don to absorb more damage.

Smoke: A chemical specialist, this SAS operative is armed with a toxic gas grenade that can slow assaults to a halt.

Final Fantasy XV

Rising from the wreckage

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Square Enix

» **Release**
TBD

Looking ahead to the future of Final Fantasy XV (formerly Final Fantasy Versus XIII) was once a sad prospect. Years ago, the project's development appeared so troubled and uncertain that its existence and viability was questioned by even the most devoted fans of the series. That changed in 2014, when Square Enix inspired new confidence in the title by announcing a playable demo entitled Episode Duscae.

The demo became available on March 17 as a bonus included with Final Fantasy Type-0 HD, and it showcases Final Fantasy XV's progress under the supervision of new director Hajime Tabata (who took the reins from Tetsuya Nomura). After all of the mystery surrounding the game, finally getting to play it feels like catching a unicorn – an elusive, legendary thing you never thought you would see. Even better, Episode Duscae points to a bright future for the full version of the game; when you take elements seen in the microcosm of the demo and imagine them spread across the complete experience, it's easy to get excited about Final Fantasy XV all over again.

Story

The story of Episode Duscae is deliberately sparse, cut off from the larger events of the main game. It features four heroes – Prince Noctis and his companions – stranded in the boondocks trying to raise money to repair their car. It's hardly saving the world, but you have opportunities to learn about the characters despite the simple premise.

Even without many cutscenes, you get a sense of the group dynamic through dialogue and animations; Gladiolus is the bruiser, Ignis is the intellectual, Prompto is the troublemaker, and all three of them defer to the reserved Noctis. They all seem to be longtime friends, and it will be interesting to see how that sense of brotherhood carries through into the main story arc. The demo ends with art and narration pointing to crumbling regimes, death, and disaster, so it's safe to assume that the whole game will not carry Episode Duscae's breezy, carefree tone.

The World

Exploring is one of the best parts of this series, whether it's a massive overworld or a single area. Final Fantasy XV doesn't stray from that tradition, though it implements exploration in a new way. Taking cues from open-world RPGs, Episode Duscae sets players loose in a large area and allows them to head off in any direction.

In one corner of the map, you can find the gas station where the car is being serviced. In another, you come across a chocobo outpost. As you wander, you encounter sidequests like finding a piece of magicite in some marshlands, and locating nearby wild chocobos. At any time, you can set waypoints to direct you to particular quests and campgrounds, but you set the pace for how you want to proceed. Think of the approach to the Gran Pulse zone of Final Fantasy XIII, but add more activities and points of interest. This method of exploring the world will be found throughout the game, and results in a sense of freedom new to Final Fantasy.

Combat

Final Fantasy XV has moved on from the menu-driven, turn-based encounters that defined it for multiple hardware generations. The combat is more along the lines of an action/RPG, since players control Noctis directly – including all movement and attacks (his friends are handled by A.I.). Positioning and timing take on new importance in the real-time encounters, forcing players to read the battlefield carefully and choose when to take an aggressive or defensive approach. If you aim a special move in the wrong direction, you miss. If you don't dodge at the right time, you pay for it.

Noctis has a wide array of abilities, so you won't just be holding down a single attack button. You can equip him with multiple weapons that change his moves in certain situations, like his opener versus his standard melee strikes. He's also able to teleport, allowing you to quickly close the distance to your enemies – or escape if the situation goes south. A variety of techniques (which consume MP) are also available, including moves like an area-clearing circular swipe, a focused lunge, and a dragoon jump. This system is a departure from the more deliberate and strategic combat of previous Final Fantasy titles, but it comes with the benefit of making the player feel like an active and powerful participant in battle – not just an outsider directing the action.

Summons

Summoning powerful creatures has been a part of the Final Fantasy series since its early days, and each entry experiments with the concept



in different ways. Final Fantasy XII and XIII saw these special allies fighting in real-time on the battlefield. Final Fantasy XV returns to the old-school approach: The Eidolons appear for one-off attacks accompanied by outstanding visual effects.

In Episode Duscae, players summon the lightning-infused Ramuh. He appears as a towering figure – as tall as a mountain – and picks up Noctis off the ground before casting his signature spell, Judgment Bolt. Not only does the lightning completely destroy any nearby foes, but it also leaves the ground scorched and glowing for several seconds after Ramuh disappears. These powerful spells come at a price; you can only summon an Eidolon when your health is at 0, making them desperation attacks rather than opening salvos.

Monster Hunting

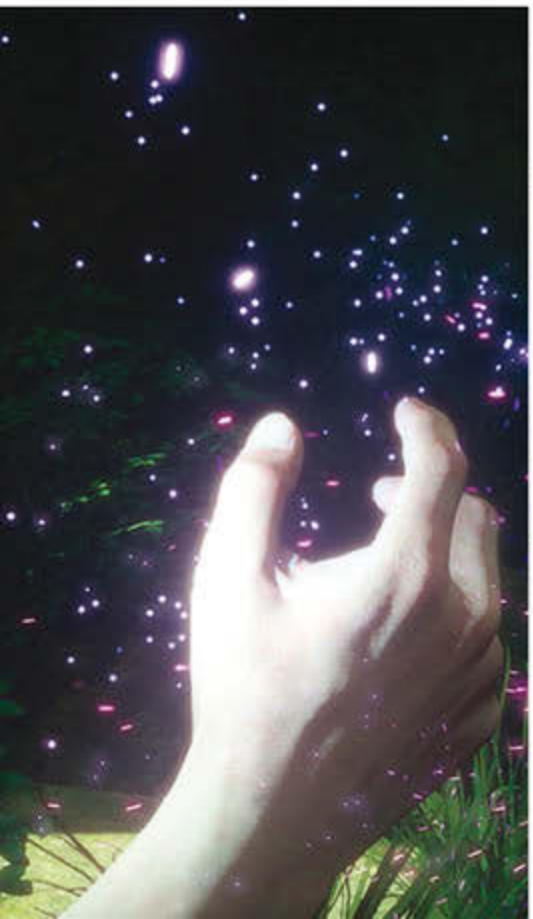
In order to raise the money for car repairs, Noctis and company decide to claim the reward for eliminating a behemoth terrorizing the area. While this is the main quest thread of the demo, everything about the process feels similar to optional monster hunts in previous games. You learn about the beast from a poster on a board, which offers money for capturing or killing the target. You then track the creature down and engage in a tough fight that may be beyond your current abilities. Considering how popular the monster hunts have been previous entries, we wouldn't be surprised if this sequence is hinting at an expanded version of the system returning in Final Fantasy XV. » **Joe Juba**



Don't forget to monitor the time of day. Strong foes come out in droves once the sun sets



Expect to meet plenty of unfriendly beasts (like this behemoth) as you wander through the open environments





Real-time combat means players' reflexes and judgment play a larger role in victory than ever before



StarCraft II: Legacy Of The Void

Bring a friend into the interstellar fray

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Real-Time Strategy
(8-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Developer**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Release**
TBA

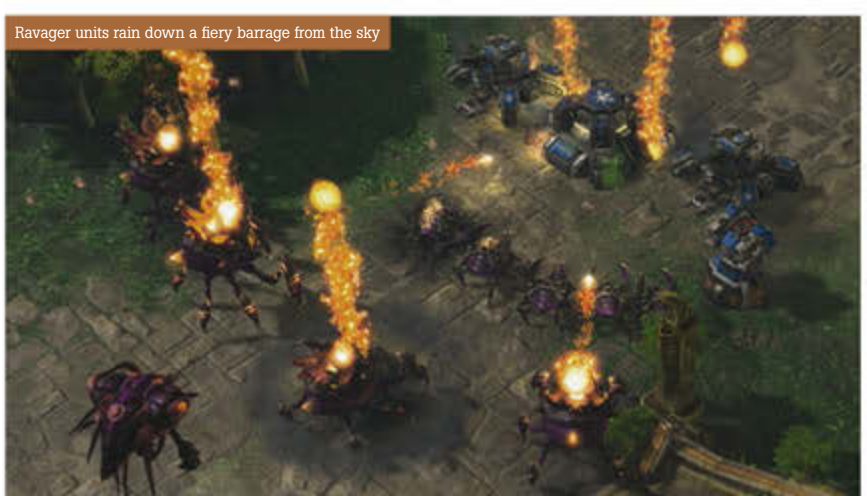
The StarCraft series has enjoyed tremendous global success since its launch in the '90s. The original RTS remained a competitive standby for decades, and StarCraft II continued that legacy while expanding the intricate intergalactic tale about unlikely racial alliances and a universal threat. The StarCraft saga concludes with the third and final entry, Legacy of the Void, but devotees of the beloved multiplayer mode have a lot to look forward to even after the credits roll.

I love so many things Blizzard has done, from SNES deep cuts like Blackthorne to World of Warcraft, but the celebrated StarCraft series has eluded me all these years. Thankfully, Blizzard is implementing a mode that's perfect for slouches like me who are surrounded by skilled StarCraft players eager to bring more friends into the fold. The mode allows two-on-two multiplayer matches, where teammates share joint control of a single army.

I got my hands on this Archon mode during a demo at GDC 2015, where I was paired up with another journalist whose StarCraft play had lapsed a bit. Considering he had more experience, I dedicated myself to managing resource gathering, building out our Terran base, and creating units to grow our army. My ally (and the helpful Blizzard reps) offered me advice on how many SCV units to assign to collecting vespene gas and minerals needed to build useful stuff. Meanwhile, my partner began scouting the map for additional resources for future base expansion and locating the enemy.

Early on, my trial by fire was overwhelming. The deluge of jargon, micromanagement strategies, and tiered build order was a lot to take in. Things got even more heated when our marines and siege tanks started meeting up with the Protoss enemies mid-battlefield. Unit production and upgrading shifted to top priority, and my co-op partner eventually took on the duties of micromanaging combat while setting destination parts for freshly created soldiers. Alternatively, we each could've shared the responsibility for managing the combat and overwhelmed the Protoss base with a coordinated pincer attack. Regardless, we gradually defeated their forces and won the day.

We succeeded in our Archon mode match thanks to some powerhouse units, like the newly added Terran Cyclone. This treaded missile tank is great for kiting enemy units away from the fray and exposing them to an explosive barrage. Blizzard also revealed a new Protoss unit called the Adept. This second-tier ranged unit wields a glowing energy disk, which chains between targets for multiple kills. She also has psionic projection, which creates an ethereal doppelganger of herself which can be moved anywhere and automatically teleports her there after 10 seconds. The Adept joins another confirmed unit, the Disruptor, and the Zergs' Lurker and Ravager.


Ravager units rain down a fiery barrage from the sky





Legacy of the Void will also introduce Allied Commanders mode, which allows players controlling different races to team up against A.I. enemies



Zerg Lurkers launch their assault from their turf



Getting a handful of new units is awesome, but Blizzard also revealed the unfortunate news that a previously announced Terran unit, the Herc, has been canceled. These bipedal tanks were originally designed to withstand zergling/baneling attacks while their teammates offer counter resistance.

Blizzard senior designer David Kim offers explanation on the scrapped unit. “The Terran Herc didn’t work out because of its overlap with the Hellbat,” Kim says, referring to a similar Terran mech unit. “We tried our best to keep the two units distinct due to their mobility advantage and different armor types, but both were short range, splash-damage units that come online around the same tech level that counters very similar things. We try our best to not have unit overlaps in the game, and these two units just shared too many similarities. We are always exploring additional unit types with the balance of the game in mind, so this does not preclude an additional unit in the future for Terran players.”

While we lost a new Terran unit, there are some new maps on the way to shake up multiplayer. The Lerilak Crest is located on a Dark Templar planet amidst the ruins of an ancient race. Orbital Shipyard is a Terran starship repair platform that floats above the planet Korhal. Ruins of Seras is set on a mountainous region on the Protoss home-world, Aiur, and features ruins being overrun by the surrounding jungle.

Blizzard still hasn’t announced an official release date, but fans can look forward to an upcoming open beta to get their StarCraft fix. The first wave begins March 31, starting with a narrow selection of candidates before broadening its pool of testers. This beta should be an enticing option whether you’re a longtime fan interested in checking out the new maps and units, or a green recruit looking to learn the space-warring ropes alongside a seasoned friend.

» **Tim Turi**

Firewatch

A thrilling pursuit of discovery in the Wyoming wilderness

» **Platform**
PC • Mac • Linux

» **Style**
1-Player Adventure

» **Publisher**
Panic

» **Developer**
Campo Santo

» **Release**
TBA

How far can your curiosity to unravel a story, world, and its characters drive you? Thanks to games like Gone Home, exploratory storytelling is taking off, showcasing how fun it can be to piece things together with few details. This is the approach for the debut game by Campo Santo, a studio packed with talent from Telltale Games, 2K Marin, and Klei Entertainment. Firewatch lets your intrigue guide you through the Wyoming wilderness as a fire lookout who's trying to get his life back on track.

Since Firewatch's announcement, Campo Santo has had difficulty conveying its game to the public. "Trying to describe this game is very hard... very challenging," says designer and writer Sean Vanaman. The Fullbright Company's Gone Home is always his go-to example describing the gameplay, so much so that Vanaman jokes that he keeps trying not to bring it with him when talking about Firewatch. Campo Santo announced the game over a year ago, but it wasn't until this past Game Developers Conference that people could play a portion of it. While it's still shrouded in mystery, my hands-on time gave a better idea of the adventure, and it's already holding a lot of promise.



Meet Henry

Firewatch begins with sparse details about the man whose shoes you're stepping into. You read a short paragraph that details the awful year our main character, Henry, has experienced. His marriage has fallen apart and he's had some trouble with drinking and driving. This leads him to move from Colorado to Wyoming, taking a job as fire lookout to gain some perspective. You're then transported to a first-person view, controlling Henry as he communicates with his supervisor Delilah over radio.

I notice right away he's still wearing his wedding ring, immediately wondering its significance, and this is exactly what Campo Santo wants to achieve. "We put that wedding ring on that finger in hopes that people would notice it and think about it," says creative director Jake Rodkin. "The game is all about those details," Vanaman adds. "Only half the story takes place in the dialogue."

I also notice that Henry doesn't appear to be the fittest guy. His arms and legs look average, not showcasing much muscle at all. Still, Henry has some strength to make his way through the wilderness. He can also rock climb to get around.

Your First Day On The Job

Firewatch starts on Henry's first day and soon jumps forward to different days on the job. This allows the player to see how Henry rapidly changes during his time in Wyoming. It also serves for the player to observe the differences and fill in the blanks from the days they don't see.

Each day has some sort of task, usually something for Henry to investigate. For Henry's first day, he spots some suspicious activity. His job is to report questionable things to Delilah, and you respond to her via dialogue options. In this case, someone is having a celebration of sorts; beer cans, a bottle of whiskey, and fireworks litter the area. Henry then comes across some bras and panties, which you can choose to report to Delilah for some humorous dialogue. He's clearly embarrassed, and Delilah takes great delight in asking him if he's 12.

The dialogue also reacts to your actions as a player. As Henry follows the missing garments, he soon finds teenage girls skinnydipping on the beach. They're far out, so I pick up their radio to get their attention then throw it in just to get a rise out of them. That gets their attention all right; they're now yelling a bunch of expletives at me, calling me a creep. I didn't have to go



Collecting Items Around Wyoming

You won't be managing an inventory in Firewatch. Every item that you need, from a flashlight to a rope, is automatically placed into Henry's backpack when he comes across it. However, fun collectibles are also around to decorate Henry's lookout tower. For example, in the demo, a supply box holds a deer antler that can then be put up in Henry's tower for show. In this box is a gross, old granola bar. It doesn't matter if you take it or not, but designer and writer Sean Vanaman says, "If you bring it with you, I'm going to write lines for it."

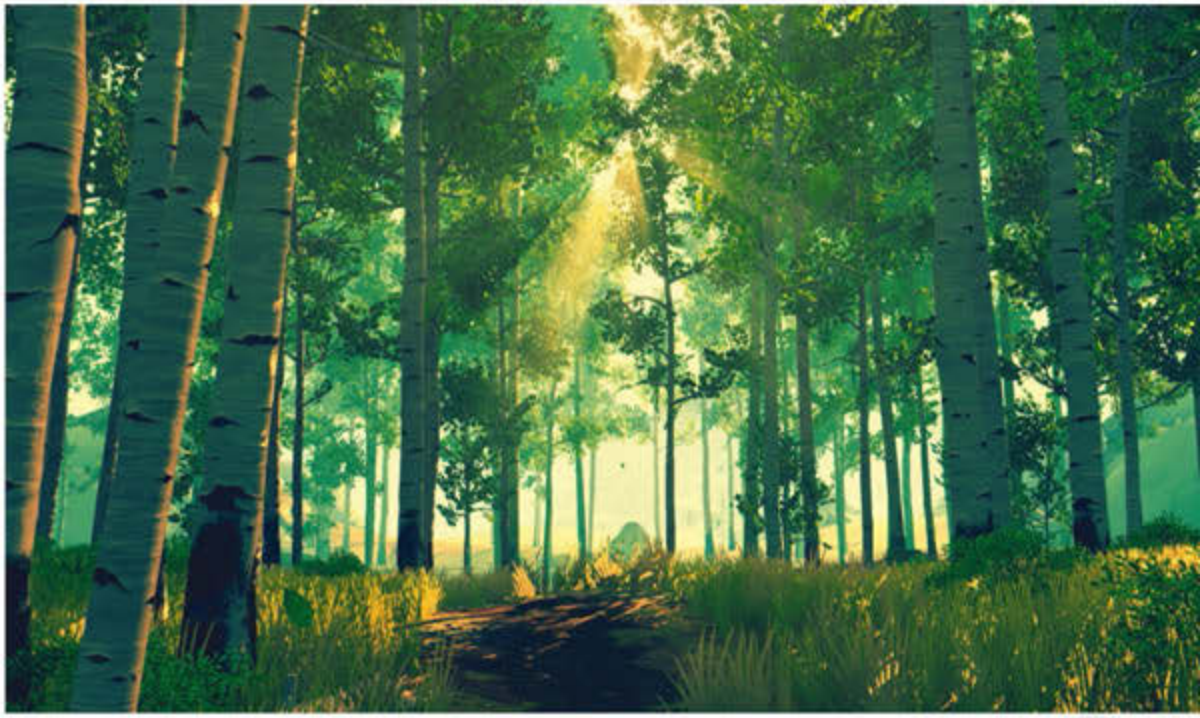


Humorous Dialogue Makes Adventuring Fun

While Henry is battling tough times, his interactions are fun and unpredictable. Campo Santo is allowing for a lot of fun with the choices, allowing plenty of places for humorous quips. For instance, I explored a cave and could choose to yell for an echo. Henry then starts singing the chorus to Toto's "Africa" – "I bless the rains down in Africa!" In another instance, Delilah reveals she's hung over for Henry's first day of work. The interactions are natural, and it's fun never knowing what crazy thing could happen next. It really feels like two people just having fun to deal with the boredom of their jobs.

that far. I had dialogue options to simply reason with them, but that's part of the fun.

Campo Santo has been playtesting to see what players would do in these situations, so appropriate dialogue reflects their actions. This scene can play out in a number of ways. "Some of my favorite things are grabbing the fireworks and throwing those in, bringing their whiskey in, just letting them yell at you," Vanaman says. "My favorite play tester just grabbed the radio and held it. You can just walk out of there holding it, and they're like, 'Hey! Where are you going?!' And then if you call Delilah, she'll say [she] can't hear what you're saying because you have the radio in your hand," Rodkin adds.



Something Is Awry

Don't expect your time in Firewatch to be all fun and games. Various signs hint more is going on than meets the eye. During my demo, the first thing that stood out was going off the beaten path and encountering a tree with weird claw marks. I report them, but Deliah insists it's probably just a bear. Things get even weirder when I spot a shadowy figure in the distance; I let Delilah know and she tells me to keep an eye out for him, but doesn't seem too concerned. She insists, "Bad things don't happen here." This makes me all the more suspicious.

The demo ends with me approaching my tower and intense heart-pounding music beginning as I spot a typewriter on the ground, which is odd. As I go up the steps to my tower, I see broken windows, books thrown all over the ground, and missing bed sheets. Somebody has broken into Henry's place. Reporting things to Delilah, she asks me who I think it could be. I could blame the skinnydippers, point to the suspicious figure that ran off, or not pick a culprit. I blame the man I saw earlier and Delilah says she'll notify the police to be on the lookout for him. This decision will have repercussions. "That stuff comes around in day two," Vanaman says. "That's the hardest part about the game. It can affect stuff that happens in the plot, the world you're walking into. Something I've kind of realized and learned with The Walking Dead [is] people are really good at remembering the continuity of a relationship to the tiniest details."

This means what you report and don't report to Delilah may affect the relationship, and you can expect some of your dialogue choices to come up again in the conversation. Vanaman thinks about the players' actions in the context of the relationship. If you don't report something, does that mean you don't trust Delilah? How would she feel finding out you didn't give her the full story? "Omission matters when it matters to the characters," Vanaman says. "What matters to the characters should matter for the player if we're doing our jobs correctly."

Between the claw marks, break-in, and Delilah's insistence on how safe the place is, it's easy to read deeper into something else going on. Both Rodkin and Vanaman emphasized there's a deep mystery to uncover beyond just the characters, even citing the film *Zodiac* as a big inspiration for the game. "It's also important for us to point out it's a thriller and an entertaining game up front," Vanaman says. "We're not setting out to make an art game. [But] we think it's very artistic and it has a message."

"We want there to be content and characters that people engage with on a real emotional level, but at the same time we do want them to actually be thrilled and be scared and embroiled in a mystery and feel like they're making progress on that and having a concrete relationship with a real person," Rodkin adds.

My head is already spinning from my demo. How will Henry and Delilah's relationship grow? Is there anything blossoming there? Is someone or something set to torture Henry? What other crazy things will he encounter outside of skinnydipping teens? From the onset, the world and characters hooked me, and I can't wait to find out more. » **Kimberley Wallace**

Voice Actors Communicate Like The Characters

Delilah serves as Henry's only confidant in the solitude of the wilderness, and these two instantly have a camaraderie and natural banter. The voice actors Rich Sommer, best known from *Mad Men* as Harry Crane, and Cissy Jones, who voiced Katjaa in Telltale's The Walking Dead, actually have conversations in a similar way to their characters. They record over Skype conference calls and had never even met face-to-face until this year's Game Developers Conference.



Lego Jurassic World

Jurassic, but plastic

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • Wii U
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360
Vita • 3DS • PC

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Warner Interactive

» **Developer**
TT Fusion

» **Release**
June

As soon as Lego announced that it had acquired the Jurassic Park license, I started hoping that we'd see a game, too. It seems like a natural fit. These summer blockbusters are filled with iconic scenes ripe for spoofing, and feature a variety of interesting characters with different personalities and skillsets. And, of course, you've got dinosaurs. Fortunately, Traveller's Tales was way ahead of me.

Don't let the name fool you – Lego Jurassic World is based on the events from all four Jurassic Park films, including the upcoming release. During my hands-on time with the game, I got to check out some of the biggest moments from the original movie, featuring one of the biggest meat lovers around.

The scene started with a bang, or in this case, a series of nerve-jangling thuds. There are only a few things that can stomp around like that, and you don't want to stick around to greet any of them. Our Lego Jeep bounced with each approaching footstep, sending a cup bouncing off the dashboard. Then the side window filled with a monstrous sight: the Tyrannosaurus rex. The moment was significantly less frightening than in the original, but it still retained much of its power – thanks in large part to the creature's signature roar.

The beast smashed one of the vehicles into the mud, trapping the kids Lex and Timmy Murphy beneath the surface. We'd have to act fast. I had Ian Malcolm and Alan Grant at my disposal, as the dinosaur poked at the submerged car with its snout. Malcolm didn't do much in the rainy scene, mostly bouncing around on his heels and acting nervous. Grant did the brunt of the work, digging up parts, slashing through vegetation with his machete, and assembling a dino-distracting contraption: a hand-cranked music box. The dinosaur didn't seem interested in hearing a stripped-down version of John Williams' classic theme, so Grant gave the box a big kick. A giant bone bounced out of the lid, mounted on a spring. That was enough to get the now puppy-like T-rex to turn around.

TT Fusion has dialed into what makes the characters in the films so memorable, and equipped them with appropriate abilities. As I mentioned, Grant is a jack of all trades. Paleobotanist Ellie Sattler dives into piles of dino poop with vigor, extracting vital clues in the process. Malcolm can throw a mean flare if he has to, and Lex's screams are put to good use by shattering glass bricks.

The game features the usual series of collectables, but there's a bonus for dino enthusiasts: Players can unlock 20 different species of dinosaur by finding hidden amber bricks, and they can be mixed and matched to create new fantastical beasts. Players can also take control of some of the smaller dinosaurs in free play, letting them show off just how clever they are. And if you feel like the T-rex got a raw deal, you'll be able to play as the big boy himself as he chases down the Jeep. Maybe we'll learn what he planned on doing with it.

» **Jeff Cork**



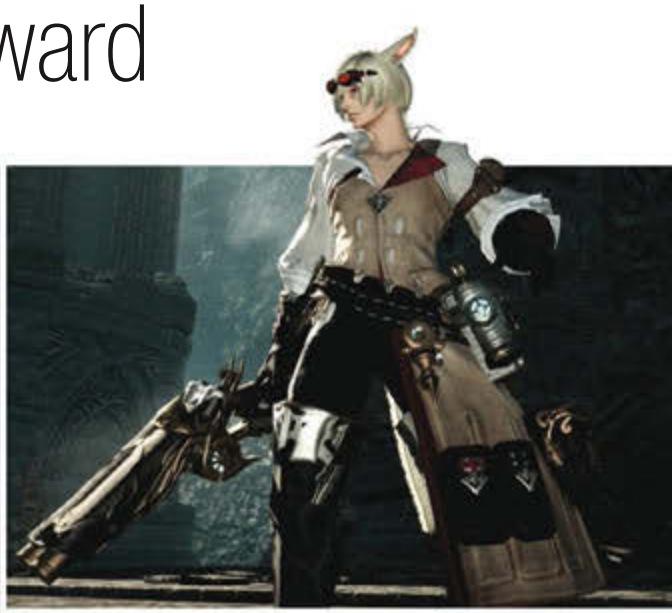
If you manage to toss five flares into the rampaging T-rex's mouth, you'll earn a hidden brick



Final Fantasy XIV: Heavensward

Finally setting foot into Ishgard should be grand







Final Fantasy XIV's new expansion, Heavensward, is giving players the chance to finally step into Ishgard – the land has been closed off since the MMORPG's beginning. Final Fantasy XIV's storyline has been building to what's behind Ishgard's gate. However, Square Enix isn't just giving players a new place to explore; it's also adding plenty of other new content.

Heavensward introduces a storyline involving the Holy See of Ishgard during the thousand-year Dragonsong War. The area definitely holds a high-fantasy vibe; expect plenty of dragons and majestic lands. Floating islands (an homage to Final Fantasy VI) are scattered about, and you take to the skies via mounts to reach them. So far, Square Enix has shown off dragon, chocobo, and griffin mounts for the expansion.

Heavensward also adds options like a new playable race called the Au Ra. If you've been playing, you might have seen a cloaked character that's part of this race. The Au Ra hail from the eastern continent of Othard and their features consist of horns, scaley skin, and tails. If you want to change your race, a fantasia will be available in the in the collector's edition; otherwise, you can purchase it for ten dollars.

Three new jobs also make their debut in Heavensward – the dark knight, astrologian, and machinist. The dark knight functions as a tank, wielding a two-handed greatsword and harnessing the power of darkness. The astrologian is a healer who can use a deck of cards and star globe to tap into healing and support powers. The machinist allows you to use firearms and mechanical turrets to hurt the enemy from afar. You'll also be able to form new allegiances. More primals based off of Final Fantasy summons are in Heavensward. The Vanu Vanu tribe's primal is Bismarck, while the Gnath have Ravana. Fans have been acquainted with Bismarck since Final Fantasy VI, but Ravana was created specifically for Heavensward.

The level cap has been raised from 50 to 60. Most of the content in Ishgard is in this range, so if you're not there yet, now is the time to get there before launch. New raid options also exist thanks to mechanical giant Alexander; you actually fight him from the inside. For instance, one section of the raid occurs in his arm, another is in his chest. Another big change is having "normal" and "hard" options for raids. Hard mode will function on the same difficulty of past raids. While the story content of both modes is the same, you'll get better gear and items for playing on hard.

Square Enix has been listening to feedback, incorporating as much as possible into the expansion, such as the different raid difficulties and a firearm class. Let's hope that Heavensward is everything fans have been waiting for. After all, those gates to Isghard have been closed for a long time, teasing what's behind them. » **Kimberley Wallace**



» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
PlayStation 3 • PC

» **Style**
Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Square Enix

» **Release**
June 23

Ashes Of The Singularity

Large-scale battles with large-scale assistance



» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy
(Multiplayer TBA)

» **Publisher**
Stardock

» **Developer**
Oxide Games

» **Release**
2015

Armchair strategy-game generals have long dealt with the disconnect between the scale of their ambition and their moment-to-moment workloads. High-ranking military commanders don't squander their precious time phoning individual tank crews, so why should their virtual counterparts? Oxide Games' newly announced RTS Ashes of the Singularity lets players amass armies with thousands of units and gives them the tools necessary to manage such power.

Adam Biessener, brand manager at publisher Stardock (and former Game Informer PC editor), pulls up a battle in progress. The 4K display is filled with the spectacle of a sci-fi battle. Hundreds of missiles streak from edge to edge, leaving streams of smoke behind them, illuminated by laser bolts that pass through. It's a stunning sight in itself, which Biessener says is made possible by Oxide's new Nitrous engine.

He pulls back the camera, providing greater context for the battle. It's but one front in a larger war, all of which is the player's responsibility. Managing so many units using genre-standard techniques would be either frustrating or impossible, which is why Oxide is introducing the concept of the "meta unit."

Players select several individual units, and then assign them into a larger group: the meta unit. It sounds similar to grouping systems we've seen in the past, but Biessener says Ashes of the Singularity takes it to a sophisticated new level.

"Once a unit is in a meta unit, it is then aware of all of the other units within its meta unit, and it changes its A.I. and its behaviors accordingly," he says. "So they fight together intelligently. They support each other intelligently. If you group some tanks with some artillery, the tanks will hang back and protect the artillery while the artillery wrecks s-- from afar. The theory is that I want to be able to say, 'This mountain pass over here, this is strategically important, I need to defend this.' I want to take a division of my army and say, 'You, go defend that.'" Once you direct your meta unit toward that area, they should be able to take it from there.

That level of autonomy extends to how you bolster existing meta units, too. "You click on a meta unit, and you say, 'I want to add six tanks, twelve artillery, six interceptors, and one of these big capital ships to it.' You add all those, and it automatically selects the nearest and/or least-busy factories, orders up the units, as soon as they pop out they go over to the meta unit, join the order of battle, and fight intelligently." That's a welcome break from how it's traditionally handled, where your attention is repeatedly pulled between your factories and battle group.

"I'm the general," Biessener says, summing up the game nicely. "I'm commanding the war, I'm not fighting in the individual battles."

» **Jeff Cork**





Necropolis

Only death awaits down in the darkness

If you have been feverishly practicing your dodge roll in games like Dark Souls and Bloodborne, you'll be happy to know it's a skill that will serve you well in Necropolis. Harebrained Schemes is making a departure from its cyberpunk role-playing Shadowrun series and tabletop darling Golem Arcana to explore something far more sinister.

Necropolis sends a near-endless parade of heroes to their deaths as they explore the titular labyrinth, created by the wizard Abraxis ages ago to store his twisted menagerie. You are tasked with exploring the winding paths and solving its mysteries.

By your side is the Brazen Head, the Necropolis' caretaker. Art director Mike McCain describes him as the labyrinth's "Jarvis," referring to Iron Man's artificial intelligence companion in the recent Marvel films. Just like Jarvis, the Brazen Head is a sardonic presence that offers you important advice, but not without verbal barbs.

He's the voice of the Necropolis, and his presence infuses the game with humor and soul. You also come across notes scribbled on the cavern walls. They aren't left by other players, as they are in Dark Souls, but rather placed procedurally by the game itself.

When connected to the Internet, you can find out how many people have died (and how) in each area. Over time, we suspect that the number will become staggering, as enemies, treacherous footing, and mistakes under pressure often lead to failure.

Harebrained Schemes is looking into other incentives for playing while connected. As an example, the team is considering mechanisms for unique weapons that are only relinquished to another player when you die.

A system for meta-progress is tied to reading codices scattered through the dungeon. As you read more, you gain buffs you can assign to a limited number of slots. As you progress further, you unlock more slots that carry over to the next adventurer when you inevitably perish.

Necropolis pushes Harebrained Schemes in a direction that is very different than the studio's past work. The early build we played shows great promise, even in a game market filled with procedural death dungeons eating players alive and spitting out their bones.

» **Michael Futter**



» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Harebrained Schemes

» **Developer**
Harebrained Schemes

» **Release**
TBD



Assassin's Creed Chronicles

Ubisoft's downloadable spin-off becomes a trilogy

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1–Player Action

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Climax Studios,
Ubisoft Montreal

» **Release**
April 21
(Chronicles: China),
2015
(Chronicles: India,
Chronicles: Russia)

Last September, Ubisoft revealed a new game called Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China in a preview video highlighting the Assassin's Creed Unity season pass. This 2.5D, side-scrolling spin-off is still on the way as a freebie for season-pass holders, and will be available separately for $10 in late April, but that's only the beginning. Ubisoft is releasing two more Chronicles games by this fall (set in India and Russia) for an additional $10 each, or as part of a $25 trilogy bundle. We got a couple hours of hands-on time with the games, and here's what we know so far.

China

The first installment takes place in China in 1526, with a watercolor-painting aesthetic. You control Shao Jun, best known for her appearance in *Assassin's Creed Embers*, the epilogue video for Revelations. The game begins as she returns from her training in Italy with Ezio Auditore (whom you see in flashbacks during tutorial sequences). A templar gang called the Tigers has slaughtered and driven out almost all of the Chinese assassins. Shao Jun is out to eliminate those in power one by one to restore the order of assassins to her homeland.



If you enjoyed Klei Entertainment's Mark of the Ninja, the 2.5D stealth action vibe should be right up your alley. You hide in darkened doorways and haystacks as guards patrol with vision cones panning the environment. You can sneak up from behind and stab them with your sword or brutal foot blades, and later earn the ability to perform jumping and sliding kills. Secondary weapons include noise distractions, stun bombs, and throwing knives. No matter how you finish your foes, hiding the body is crucial to avoid setting off an alarm state and summoning reinforcements. Fighting toe-to-toe isn't ideal, as it doesn't take much to kill you. Carefully timed button presses block melee attacks and dodge crossbow bolts, and a mix of heavy and light attacks put enemies in a weakened state. At this point, you simply tap the heavy attack to finish them off.

Every checkpoint saves your progress and issues a grade. If you weren't seen and didn't harm anyone, you earn the valuable Shadow gold rating for maximum points. If you focus more on silent assassinations or fighting, you can earn golds in those categories as well. Reaching certain point values unlocks upgrades like extending your health bar or adding to secondary weapon ammo. Completing secondary objectives, like collecting assassin scrolls or freeing slaves, also contributes to the final tally.

This is Assassin's Creed, so expect plenty of series trademarks. Shao Jun can climb up buildings and synchronize viewpoints to see more of the map, hidden chests, and Animus fragments. Next, take a classic leap of faith into a haystack. Eagle vision makes an appearance as well, showing patrol paths and highlighting targets like a guard carrying an important key.

While sneaking and stealth is the core of the game, speed-running levels shake things up from time to time. The final stage in the demo is all about outrunning explosions and flames while trying to escape a base. Rather than using the standard scoring methods, players only have to worry about the completion time.

India

Assassin Arbaaz Mir (from the *AC: Brahman* graphic novel) stars in this 1841 adventure set amid the conflict between the Sikh Empire and East India Company. He must track a templar who has recently appeared with a strange object and steal it back. Romance is a factor as well, but we don't know many of the details just yet. The art style changes things up with vivid colors and a newspaper-etching look.

The one area we played in the second game was in the speed-running category. Arbaaz must climb along crumbling structures and stalactites inside a massive cave without falling into the gaping pit below. The middle section is patrolled by guards who carry swords and pistols, a changeup from the crossbows in China.

After completing a platforming puzzle to open a massive door, I enter an enormous futuristic chamber created by the First Civilization. It's loaded with glowing energy traps that kill you in one hit (similar to those players have seen in previous AC games). The end of the demo fades to black, so we just have to wait to see what's inside this mysterious vault.

Russia

The final entry wasn't available to play, but we know that Nikolai Orelov stars as an assassin helping to rescue the Tsar's daughter and escape with an artifact. The 1918 story takes on the look of Russian propaganda art. Fans may remember him from AC comics *The Fall* and *The Chain* and as an ancestor to villain Daniel Cross. He stands apart from the other protagonists with his sniper rifle shots; it will be interesting to see how this long-range weapon changes the gameplay. » **Bryan Vore**



The Flame In The Flood

The art of survival

The Flame in the Flood intrigued us with its unique art style and unpredictable river-rafting gameplay back when The Molasses Flood successfully used Kickstarter for funding. The team is amazingly talented, with members who worked on popular franchises like BioShock, Halo, and Rock Band. We finally got our hands on The Flame in the Flood and it already shows that The Molasses Flood is creating something special.

The Flame in the Flood is all about survival. A catastrophic flood leaves a young woman named Scout seeking safety. Along for the ride is her trusty dog, Aesop, who can carry extra resources. Like most survival games, such as Don't Starve, you must monitor Scout's energy, thirst, warmth, and hunger. Letting any fall too low results in a game over. Your goal is to reach the end of the river where "salvation lies." Along the way you might bump into strangers and discover clues that to tell the deeper story of the land.

Making sure Scout's needs are met is a big part of the challenge. She'll need to search the wilderness for resources, seek shelter from dangerous weather changes, and raft down an unwieldy, procedurally generated river. Surviving won't be easy, and it'll take smart thinking and good instincts. The game has permadeath, so once you die you must take on a new trek through the harsh environment. Because of the procedurally generated content, no trip will be like the last, meaning you can never prepare ahead of time for anything. Everything is meant to make you think in the moment, like the river suddenly having choppy waters or a rough storm forcing you to dock and seek shelter. At the very least, the items you store with Aesop do carry over between games.

The best way to describe The Flame in the Flood is that it's a constant learning experience. I discover this firsthand when I finally take control of Scout. I pick up every resource in sight before embarking on the river. The rafting is definitely what separates it from other survival games. Your raft looks like a big heaping junk pile, but it can handle some wear and tear.

Rafting feels just as it should; you're adjusting to the currents and making sure you turn in enough time so you don't cut it too close and crash. Damaging your raft with a hard crash means you need to fix it up, adding more on your plate. In addition, you must decide what risks to take on the river. Do you take on dangerous rapids to get ahead of the rain?

My time on the river starts off peaceful and serene as I look in the distance for potential places to dock. But soon all my planning gets interrupted by a vicious storm. The raft becomes more challenging to control, and I do my best to find a place because Scout is getting soaked. This naturally affects her warmth, so I need to get her dry by a fire as soon as possible.

Crafting is essential and can make or break everything. I find out fast that I'll need to craft to light the fire. After letting her rest by the fire, I get back to crafting and create a trap. I see rabbits, so I know this is my chance to catch some dinner, but as I make my way toward my trap with a rabbit, I spot some wolves. Scout is just an everyday girl; she doesn't have superpowers or MMA fighting skills. My only combat ability is my wits and to use stealth to avoid an encounter. They can fight over the rabbit for now.

As I dig into the crafting, I begin to realize how important my decision-making will be, especially with my limited inventory. After all, I could craft some insulated gear that would keep Scout warmer during storms, or I could focus on her immediate needs. Even my next destination on the river could be do-or-die. You need to be smart with where you dock and think what places will tend to have what you need, whether it be shelter, food, or resources.



I didn't survive much longer in The Flame in the Flood as I met rougher currents and got caught up in the exploration, neglecting some of my needs. Still, I enjoyed the difficulty; you definitely need to think carefully about each situation, but I suspect part of the fun is getting better with every try to best the challenge. The Flame in the Flood does share similarities to other survival games, but where it really shines is in its beautiful art style and intense river-rafting that adds interesting dilemmas to the gameplay. » **Kimberley Wallace**

» **Platform**
Xbox One • PC • Mac

» **Style**
1-Player Adventure

» **Publisher**
The Molasses Flood

» **Developer**
The Molasses Flood

» **Release**
2015



Might & Magic Heroes VII

A fresh and familiar take on turn-based fare

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy
(8-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft Entertainment

» **Developer**
Limbic Entertainment

» **Release**
2015

The Heroes of Might & Magic series has undergone big changes since it started making many waves on the PC scene with classics like Heroes of Might & Magic 2 and 3 many years ago. After getting some hands-on time with the upcoming Might & Magic Heroes VII, I'm happy to say that the much-lauded third entry is a significant source of inspiration for the game, and could give this turn-based strategy series a much-needed boost in the modern age.

Many of the classic factions like Haven, Academy, Necropolis, Stronghold, Sylvan, and Dungeon factions are available to play in the base game. As with other titles in the series, your heroes are generally might or magic focused. Players must build up armies of minions and explore the map, picking up resources and engaging in battle with various NPCs and other players.

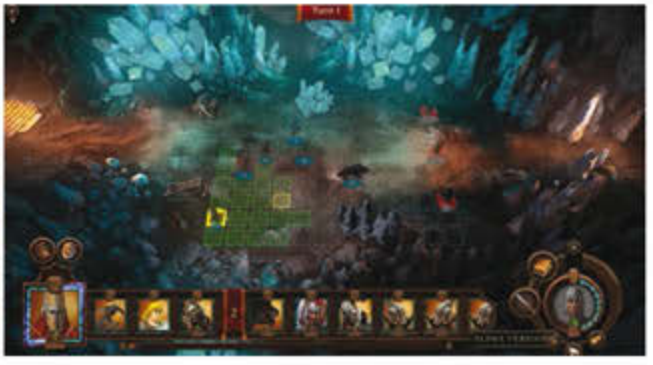
My Haven vs. Haven multiplayer matchup gave me a good sense of what Limbic is trying to do in terms of competitive multiplayer. With smaller maps driving more intimate encounters, games take significantly less time to play out. This is a major boon for the series and is a stark contrast to the hefty maps that could take days to finish in previous entries. Not all the multiplayer maps are constructed in this fashion, but those that are should allow players looking for fast matches to punch out games in a reasonable chunk of time, especially in one-on-one battles.

Structure building should be familiar to series vets, following the well-worn template of building up city halls for additional income and creating/upgrading troop-spawning buildings. The wide selection here allows players not only to focus on building up mage guilds for new spells and resource-producing buildings, but allowing for "one-of-two" choices delving down specific upgrade paths to boost and amplify the units of their choosing. Might & Magic Heroes VII also introduces a new feature called the caravan, which is a godsend for players like me that like to focus on a single hero while roaming around the map. The caravan allows you to taxi units to and from your cities, so you don't need to make a "hero mule" to bring your active/main hero units and supplies. This is a welcome addition.

The game features a single-player campaign mode as well. Players have the opportunity to tackle campaigns for each faction, leading up to a final campaign where they can use the resources, heroes, and other perks acquired in the other campaign modules. You can access the final campaign after completing just two campaigns, but if you're looking to get extra advantages to take the edge off the challenging final confrontation, you should complete all the various faction campaigns first.

As a huge fan of older Heroes of Might & Magic titles, I'm eager to see if Might & Magic Heroes VII can reinvigorate my love for the franchise when it hits later this year. So far, the improvements seem promising. » **Daniel Tack**





Fable Legends

Being bad has its benefits



Morality has been one of the consistent themes of the Fable series. Albion has lots of people to rescue, treasures to loot, and monsters to kill, and you're often given the latitude to determine what works best for you. Are you greedy, or do you share the wealth? Are you honest? Do you get your kicks by kicking chickens? As the hero of your story, it's been your call. Fable Legends places a wicked dividing line between good and bad, naughty and nice. Even if you love exploring the gray spaces between the extremes, you're going to have to pick a side. You're either one of the heroes in this adventure, or you're the villain. And, as I learned, there are plenty of great things about being bad.

The setup is simple: Four heroes team up to tackle a variety of quests, slaying monsters and earning acclaim along the way. A fifth player joins in with one simple goal: to ruin everything for the other guys. Following the long tradition of big baddies everywhere, the villain doesn't cause problems in person. Instead, you have a variety of diabolical tools and traps to take on those do-gooders from afar.

The mission I played is set in a lost village, where a curse has shrunken the party of four heroes down to thumb-sized pests. They scramble through the town, taking on hordes of monsters and doing their best to return to full size. Clearly, that won't do.

While the good guys are roaming the world in a traditional third-person view, the bad guy is able to monitor their actions from up on high. Before a quest starts, the villain can survey the level and determine how best to thwart the heroes' plans. Symbols appear on the world, which represent various mobs, treasures, and hazards. You don't have to tweak things around at first, but it pays off. Put a chest near a dead end, and you can trap anyone who beelines over to it with a barrier. As they frantically bash the wooden planks, you can drop an area-of-effect attack on them or place an invisible enemy behind them.

One of the sneakiest combos I saw involved a carefully placed explosive mine and a gate. An unsuspecting hero walks over the fence, which is buried, and it pops up – sending the hero into the air, where they land on the bomb. The blow isn't fatal, but it does a great job of sending them into a paranoid frenzy. Once scattered, you'll find that heroes aren't so tough after all.

» **Jeff Cork**





» **Platform**
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action
(5-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Microsoft

» **Developer**
Lionhead Studios

» **Release**
2015



Alone With You

Finding love in a doomed world



» **Platform**
PS4 • PS Vita

» **Style**
1-Player Adventure

» **Publisher**
Sony

» **Developer**
Benjamin Rivers Inc.

» **Release**
2015

From its onset, Alone with You paints a picture of doom and gloom. You are the only remaining human left on a planet. Your only connection to another is the colony's A.I., which alerts you that the planet has 21 days left before it decays so much it becomes uninhabitable. You must build your own escape ship to leave before then, but you need to explore the colony to find the tools you need. Finding the right gear is just part of the challenge, since only long-dead crew members know how to use it. Lucky for you, the A.I. can bring up holograms of past survivors who can impart their knowledge and aid you.

This is an adventure game at heart, so there is plenty of exploration, such as visiting different parts of the colony and using your scanner to collect new data. However, the real draw comes from your interactions with the holographic replicas of long-dead inhabitants. During these chats, they give you tips on how to survive and make repairs, but you can also get intimate with them, learning more about who they were before they perished. Your chats can even blossom into dating and romance.



In my demo, I chatted with Winnie. She talks about my pursuit to find some parts, and I respond to her questions by choosing from the different dialogue options. By the end of the conversation, she begs me to find out how she died; I immediately promise and make it my task. What you explore and what decisions you make tie into these conversations. "Different things you get to talk about on the date will be things you saw or didn't see," says creator Benjamin Rivers. "It's not a game you're supposed to min/max. [You're] just supposed to naturally go through things and realize, 'Oh yeah, we're talking about that thing that I did. That's cool.' That exploring feeds into the dating and the dating feeds into the exploring.'"

All players go through the main story, which focuses on getting off the planet, but the paths differ depending on your conversations with past colonists and how much you cozy up to them. Rivers created four different holograms, all with different quirks. For instance, Winnie deals with uncertainty and self-doubt, while the past colony leader, Pierre, is a cocky, flawed man. "Everyone has sort of a tragic ending," River says. Rivers wanted the conversations to have a natural progression, where you get more intimate and discover more about these now-deceased characters.



This even comes down to finding out how they died and why. He cites Persona's social links as a big inspiration. "What I've tried to do is avoid the tropes that you often see, even like in Persona, the sporty girl or the shy one," River says. "There's always these very specific character tropes and I figured there's a lot more room to get complex, while also being more iconic and approachable."

Alone with You holds a somberness that's even more evident as you play, thanks to the tragic situation and the ambient soundtrack. Conversations with the holographic crew members come off as genuine, making you want to know more about these people. Even if it means coming to terms with the fact that they've ceased to exist and finding out the sadder circumstances behind that.

» **Kimberley Wallace**



We Happy Few

It's time to take your medicine

» Platform
PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Compulsion Games

» Developer
Compulsion Games

» Release
Early 2016

Contrast developer Compulsion Games is leaving the shadowy world of its last game behind for something far more sinister. We Happy Few, a first-person roguelite, is set in an eerie town filled with drug-addled residents teetering on the edge of violence. We sat down for a demo to push the residents of Wellington Wells over the edge, and it didn't end well for our poor hero.

I emerge from my hiding place underneath the town. A panicked man runs toward me screaming, before a constable smacks him with a billy club and leaves him on the ground. I look down. His face is covered by a mask. Behind the smile, his eyes are wide. I think he's dead, and I'm terrified.

I begin to walk around cautiously. Everyone has the same plastered grins on their faces. I don't want to suffer the same fate as that poor man. He didn't take his Joy. He realized just how wrong things are in Wellington Wells.

Everyone's on the stuff, and you'd think it would make them docile. No, if they sense that I'm not high on Joy too, they'll attack.

I'm hungry and thirsty, and there's only one choice. I've got to break into someone's house for supplies. I've got to be careful though, because people booby-trap their homes. I need to get in, knock out anyone home, lock the doors, and start looking.

Sneaking in allows me to get the jump on the occupant and, knock him out before he realizes what happened. I avoid the laser trap and find a bottle of water in the refrigerator. I guzzle it down before I realize that something's wrong.

The colors are brighter, and from out of nowhere there's peppy music playing. The water was drugged. At least I'm safe from the townsfolk for now, but why would I want to escape? Everything is so happy here.

After a time I come down from my high. Things feel sluggish and I'm suddenly even hungrier and thirstier than when I awoke. It's too late though; someone saw me come out of the house. They know I don't belong here. The mob closes in, and I know that I'll never leave Wellington Wells. » **Michael Futter**

Volume

An inventive take on espionage



» Platform
PlayStation 4 • Vita

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Mike Bithell

» Developer
Mike Bithell

» Release
2015

Stealth games are a rare breed these days. Games like The Last of Us and The Order: 1886 might feature sneaking sequences, but rarely do they revolve entirely around the gameplay mechanic. Mike Bithell, developer of Thomas Was Alone, flies in the face of that standard with a vivid, lively take on the genre.

The aesthetic is inspired by the polygonal framework of Metal Gear Solid's VR missions. The gameplay also echoes that titles' design choices, with bite-sized missions that present players with specific, increasingly challenging tasks.

The player evades guards while controlling the action from an overhead view. Watching guards' vision cones while navigating the environment is a crucial skill. The gameplay is spiced up thanks to useful items like ricocheting sound grenades, muted boots, and the distracting "Oddity" (functionally similar to MGS2's naughty magazines). There are often multiple ways to approach a given stealth puzzle, but the fun comes from finding the most efficient solutions.

During my brief hands-on time with the game, I grew to appreciate the responsive, dual-analog controls and generous checkpoint system. Stealth games have a reputation for frustrating some players, but Volume seems poised to do for the genre what Super Meat Boy did for hardcore 2D platformers. » **Tim Turi**



reviews



gamerinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

89 Bloodborne

Bloodborne takes the core from the successful Souls franchise and spins it in tantalizing new directions, with a focus on aggressive combat and a transition from dark fantasy to pure horror. Whether you're a seasoned Souls veteran or a newcomer to the fantastic worlds of From Software, prepare yourself for an atmospheric voyage through dreams and nightmares.

THE **SCORING** SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Corrupted game saves.

AWARDS

gamerinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gamerinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gamerinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gamerinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

For more information on the age classification ratings in our reviews, head to gameinformer.com/ratings


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Helldivers

A smart take on the twin-stick shooter

8.5

PS4 • PS3 • Vita

» Concept
Create a four-player, twin-stick shooter that values teamwork and accuracy over mindless blasting

» Graphics
The animation and effects make Helldivers a gorgeous game, even if the small models don't have a lot of detail

» Sound
This is Helldivers' biggest flaw; both the music and dialogue quickly become unforgivably repetitive

» Playability
Helldivers is more demanding than most top-down shooters, but tight mechanics and a smart control scheme give you a fighting chance

» Entertainment
With a wide range of difficulty levels and endless planets to conquer, Helldivers doles out as much co-op fun as you can handle

» Replay Value
High



gamesinformer SILVER

Style 1 to 4-Player Shooter (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer Arrowhead Game Studios **Release** March 3 **Rating** T

Most twin-stick shooters serve up ammo and enemies in equally infinite proportions, embracing the shoot-everything-that-moves formula that has come to define the genre. Helldivers is different. While the hordes of enemies are just as endless, limited ammo and the ever-threatening presence of friendly fire create a more challenging and calculated shooter.

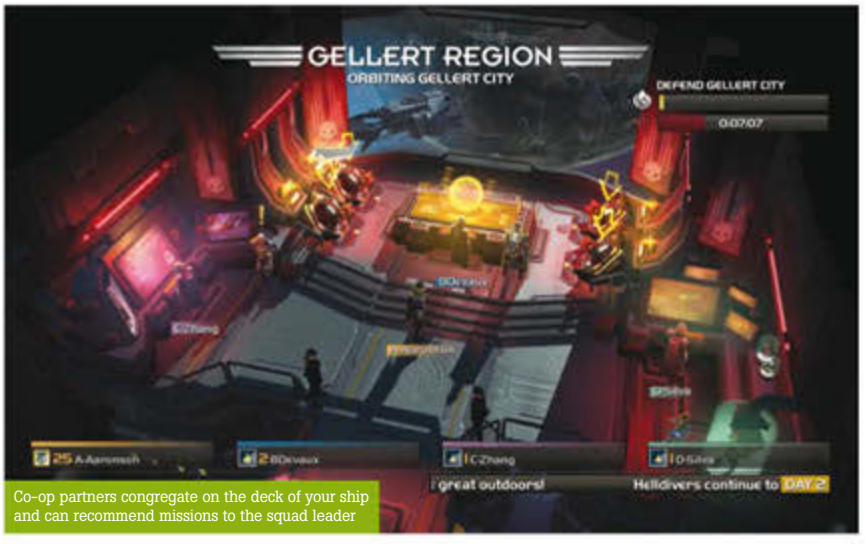
Helldivers' less subtle take on *Starship Troopers* tasks players with exterminating a trio of alien races and taking over the galaxy one planet at time on behalf of Super Earth. Unlike most games, this quest for supremacy is a community affair; everyone's progress contributes to the overall cause. You select your warfront (bugs, cyborgs, or the alien Illuminate), a randomized planet to battle on (from one of 12 difficulty levels), and then complete missions to level up your helldiver, unlock new gear, and upgrade your existing armaments before jumping back into the fray. This simple-yet-satisfying gameplay loop has a surprising amount of variety; each of the three alien races features different enemy types and fighting styles, and objectives offer a healthy number of variations on taking and defending points, blowing up enemy encampments, and escorting. Three planet types (jungle, desert, and snow) mix things up further, as do special hours-long attack and defend events that pop up every couple of days and award bonus XP.

Like Diablo III, each procedurally generated map in Helldivers feels unique and familiar at the same time, as does the moment-to-moment gameplay. I grew comfortable mowing down countless swarms of hostile aliens (ideally with three friends at my side) while sprinting from one objective to the next. You take brief pauses to call down strategems from the heavens to aid you in combat and hopefully keep you alive for what always seems like a last-second extraction.

Strategems are the real draw of Helldivers' deep progression system and gameplay variety, supplying you with everything from rocket launchers and airstrikes to your own overpowered mech. Surviving higher difficulty levels requires coordinating who brings what to the fight and working in constant unison, but even on lower difficulty levels, Helldivers doubles down on communication and teamwork; you're just as likely to be offed by an inaccurate squadmate or your own automated turret as an enemy ambush.

Even after the unlocks dry up, the challenge and camaraderie that Helldivers offers makes it hard not to attempt "just one more mission" with your friends, a proposition made all the more enticing by the inclusion of four-player couch co-op. The community-driven galactic campaign doesn't offer much of a story, but contributing to the larger war effort is just one more welcome excuse to enlist.

» Jeff Marchiafava



Co-op partners congregate on the deck of your ship and can recommend missions to the squad leader

The Edge

Helldivers is a cross-buy, cross-play, cross-save title for PlayStation 4, PlayStation 3, and PlayStation Vita. While the core gameplay is identical, the loading times, visuals, and framerate get steadily worse across the three respective platforms, making the PS4 version the clear favorite.

Ori And The Blind Forest

Beauty in death

GOLD

Style 1-Player Action/Adventure **Publisher** Microsoft Game Studios **Developer** Moon Studios **Release** March 11 **Rating** E



Within the opening minutes of Ori and the Blind Forest, developer Moon Studios teases a playful and uplifting experience that focuses on two unlikely companions – Ori and Naru – coming together to form the bond of friendship. These moments unfold through a heartfelt warmth we rarely see in games – the kind where you just want to sit back, observe, and not interact for fear of interrupting the delicate fabric of happiness shared between these two characters. Their friendship frames a beautiful introduction to a game, a triumph of both visuals and storytelling.

Moon wants you to fall in love with these characters, quickly and unconditionally. This makes the next series of events hit with as much force as possible – leading to moments of shock and despair, and questioning if there's reason to continue playing.

In these sequences, we witness the accelerated death of Nibel Forest, Ori and Naru's home. The world falls to darkness. Deadly briar patches and predators fill the spaces that once held fruit-bearing trees. The only hope of this world surviving lies with Ori, an outcast forest spirit who, in a moment of great sadness, learns he's gifted with the power to bring life back to the world.

What unfolds next is a fascinating exploration of a dying world; a journey filled with breathtaking environments and a surprising amount of death – not of characters met along the way, but Ori's.

Ori and the Blind Forest is every bit as challenging as it is beautiful. From the outset, it delivers the impression that it's easy to pick up and play, with focus falling more to the visuals than meaningful gameplay trials. It looks like a colorful platformer for everyone. As you progress, you learn that couldn't be further from the truth.

The early moments of Ori joyfully spinning and twirling across harmless platforms don't last for long. Once the gameplay kicks into high gear, Moon pushes players to perform flawlessly. Skill is paramount. Slight miscalculations in timing result in Ori crushed beneath boulders and burned to ash by lava. There were times where I found myself doubting my abilities, wondering if I would ever make it to the end. I died often – repeatedly in the same spots – but never once did I feel my deaths were the fault of the controls or bad gameplay design. Most death came from me panicking and messing up my execution.

Ori controls admirably, allowing for such demands. His ever-expanding moveset (which offers slick wall-running, ground-pounding, and an inventive ability that slingshots him higher) is expertly designed, allowing players to rapidly fire off a wide variety of moves to tackle crazily designed vertical spaces. None of these abilities feel tacked on. They're all fun to use, and make Ori look like an acrobatic badass.

The challenges are wonderfully scripted, often pushing for as much skill as they do creative thinking. Like all sidescrolling Metroid games, there are plenty of secrets hidden in this world, many demanding thorough exploration and leaps of faith. This is one of those games where you'll want to take the time to veer off of the critical path to fill in the map.

Combat is also a central focus, but it almost contradicts the platforming design, relying more on rapid button pressing than precision. Ori's primary attack is a white flame that automatically homes in on targets (though its functionality sometimes leads to frustrating instances where the shots aren't hitting the desired target). Ori is as nimble as Samus Aran, but even with a fully upgraded arsenal (which is unlocked by earning experience and finding skill points), he isn't a killing machine. His combat prowess is impressive, but it takes a backseat to movement. The focus of this experience is almost always on the platforming, even for boss encounters.

There isn't a bad moment in Ori and the Blind Forest. Every design has a purpose. Every challenge feels lovingly made. The story, which I expected to die off after the introduction, stays strong and makes a few crazy twists along the way. Even backtracking (of which there's a fair amount) is quick if you want it to be, or loaded with opportunities to explore previously unreachable areas.

Interestingly, the game rarely auto-checkpoints progress. Players must manually save whenever they want a checkpoint in an area. This process isn't handled through menus, but is instead a central part of the control. Just hold down the B button and you create a new save…if Ori has energy to spare. Energy is a little hard to come by early on – leading to moments of weighing risk and reward – but quickly becomes abundant, allowing players to create as many saves as they need. Yes, there is some concern of losing progress from forgetting to save, but trust me, the game conditions you to save often. Once you complete a ridiculously hard sequence, the immediate thought afterward is "I don't want to do that again. Save!"

Ori and the Blind Forest is one of the best games of the year, and should be a no-brainer for anyone looking for an exciting new adventure to dive into. That said, it comes with a warning: Expect to be humbled by its difficulty. Death comes quickly. Over and over, you're going to watch an adorable little creature perish because you had a moment of indecision or your skills failed you. Again, nothing about this experience feels unfair. Some of the long scripted sequences are enormously challenging – to the point that you'll likely repeat every swear word that you know.

My wife periodically poked her head into my game room to ask if I was having a nervous meltdown, but I instead told her that I haven't had this much fun with a game in a long time.

» **Andrew Reiner**

9.5

Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
A "Metroidvania" game that focuses on story and art as much as platforming and challenge

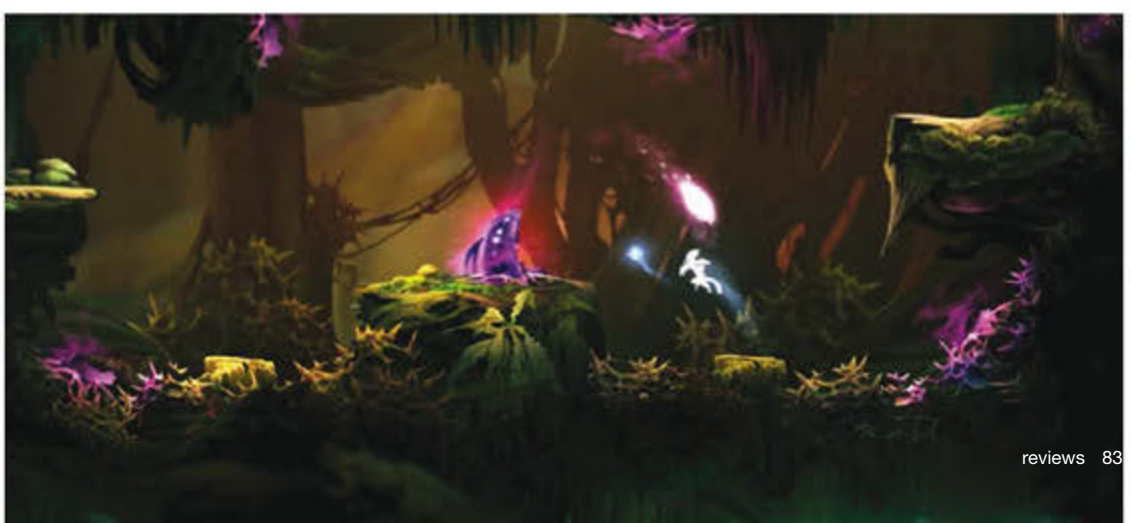
» **Graphics**
Equally haunting and beautiful, and both simple and detailed, the environments are uniquely mesmerizing

» **Sound**
A wonderful orchestral score melds with the action, adding tension to sequences and heart to the story

» **Playability**
Pitch-perfect controls are put to good use in platforming challenges that demand precision. The adventure gets better as Ori unlocks new abilities

» **Entertainment**
Nothing short of a work of art

» **Replay Value**
Moderate



Battlefield: Hardline

Waging a war on two fronts



8

PS4 • Xbox One
PS3 • 360 • PC

» Concept
Take Battlefield off the front lines for a faster and more compact cops-and-robbers excursion

» Graphics
Despite using DICE's Frostbite 3 engine, Visceral can't achieve the same visual fidelity as the series' creators. That said, the environments and characters still look good

» Sound
The voice acting is solid and the sound effects provide the same aural thrills players expect from the series

» Playability
Hardline uses a virtually identical control scheme to Battlefield 4 and handles just as well. You'll probably still crash the helicopters, though

» Entertainment
Skip the single-player campaign and jump straight into the refined multiplayer

» Replay Value
High

Style 1-Player Shooter (66-Player Online) **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** Visceral Games, DICE **Release** March 17 **Rating** M

In 2013, EA and DICE learned the dangers of going to war with the army you have. The half-baked launch of Battlefield 4 and the myriad technical problems that followed consumed DICE's full attention, leaving Visceral to fill the void with a new, unnumbered entry in the series. Hardline branches off the tried-and-true Battlefield formula with the kind of different ideas that you might expect a new developer to bring to the plate. However, some things about war never change: Like other recent entries, the single-player campaign falls flat while the multiplayer shines.

Despite Visceral's best attempts to tell a good story, Hardline's single-player campaign is a mess. The military shooter's transition to a cops-and-robbers theme has shifted the gameplay focus from open warfare to sneaking up on and arresting people; stealth sequences make up the majority of the campaign, and despite taking obvious cues from the Far Cry series, they fail to deliver the same highs or tactical variety. Shootouts are still frequent, but your limited arsenal (you can only have one firearm and a handgun at a time) and the superhuman accuracy of your enemies make them more frustrating than exciting. The driving sequences are so slow, dumbed down, and scripted that they almost feel like on-rail segments. Aside from an explosive standoff at an abandoned airstrip, most of the set-piece moments are forgettable.

If Hardline was only its single-player campaign, it would be one of the biggest flops of the year. Thankfully, it isn't just a solo cop drama gone wrong, and the heart of the franchise beats on – albeit at a different tempo. Hardline's multiplayer scales down the maps and vehicular combat for a more condensed and faster-paced experience that's still worthy of the Battlefield name.

Even Hardline's biggest maps, like the desert town of Dust Bowl and the industrial depots of Derailed, pale in comparison to the sprawling warzones of previous Battlefield games, but each one still serves up plenty of interesting and dynamic locations to fight over. The shift to mostly transport vehicles (tanks and jets are MIA) also limits the scale of combat, but I appreciate the focus on infantry, which is what most players spend their time on anyway.

Some diehard fans will dismiss Hardline as the further COD-ification of Battlefield, but the gunplay isn't any twitchier than previous iterations. The smaller maps simply mean you have less downtime before getting into the action. This can make it harder to get your bearings (especially when spawning on a squad member), but the players who come out on top are still the ones who understand the pros and cons of their chosen weapon, make smart use of their items, and coordinate with their teammates.

The downsized maps mean that smaller player counts are better; 32-player Conquest delivers the thrills you know and love about the timeless mode, while the 64-player matches can devolve into total chaos. Thankfully, most of Hardline's new modes are geared toward smaller player counts. Hotwire's mobile take on Conquest delivers plenty of thrills, while Heist and Blood Money both offer interesting twists on capture the flag – and you won't think twice about them all capping out at 32 players. Crosshair and Rescue evolve the one-life, five-on-five formula of Battlefield 4's Defuse mode, and are entertaining diversions as well.

Visceral also changed up player progression with a new cash-based system, and after a week of multiplayer, I don't think I can ever go back to a linear unlocking scheme. Buying the guns and items you actually want with the money you earn from matches just makes sense, and eliminates the annoyance of grinding XP to get past an unlock you know you're never going to use. Items that aren't class-specific are universal unlocks, so you're not starting from scratch when you switch roles. At the same time, weapon attachments and some special firearms do have requirements before you can purchase them, so you can't just buy the best gear possible from the get-go. The ability to save multiple loadouts for each class is an obvious, yet very welcome, addition to the game as well.

Perhaps the best praise I can heap on Hardline is for what nowadays constitutes a miraculously smooth launch. I have yet to be disconnected from a single match, and lag has been almost nonexistent as well. I'd like to see a few more options for getting together and playing with friends, but squads are functional and performed flawlessly during my playtime, suggesting EA learned its lessons from Battlefield 4's failures. It's a commendable and necessary achievement for the future of the franchise.

Some fans of the series have been quick to declare that Hardline isn't a "true" Battlefield game due to the changes it presents. In truth, I sometimes miss the larger scale, slower pace, and heavy ordnance (not to mention the old killcam) of Battlefield 4's multiplayer, but they don't have to be mutually exclusive. Both experiences are appealing in their own way, and I don't plan on taking Hardline out of my rotation anytime soon. Just do yourself a favor and skip the single-player campaign. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

This review pertains to the PlayStation 4 version



Final Fantasy Type-0 HD

An experimental misstep

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Square Enix **Release** March 17 **Rating** M

Not so long ago, few game releases could get me as excited as a new Final Fantasy. After numerous offshoots, spin-offs, and mobile ports, I'm now more tempered in my expectations. I came to Type-0 with an eagerness to rediscover my love of the franchise, but concerned about whether this new game could keep pace with other modern role-playing successes. Type-0 has dozens of hours of content with which to stay busy. Unfortunately, the combat at the core of the game is mediocre, and the story is barely comprehensible.

Unlike many Japanese RPGs, Type-0 starts out strong. A dark and melancholy opening presents a world at war with itself, with young soldiers trapped in a conflict between technology and magic. Ultima is now a weapon of mass destruction used to annihilate nations. A summoned Odin eidolon is a tool of last resort to protect borders. A young group of elite soldiers stands poised to turn the tide of the war in favor of the nation of magic users, and the class members conveniently fall into familiar class/job archetypes, like bard, paladin, and dragoon. A further twist adds an element of mystery; soldiers killed in battle are wiped from the memories of those still living, leading to some interesting contemplations on the nature of conflict and the value placed on those sent to fight.

Rather than focus on these complexities, the plot becomes a string of disconnected missions about retaking territory, and a broader narrative overwhelmed by non-sequiturs. With 14 classmates to juggle, we never really get a clear sense of who each character is and why we should care about them. Conversations feel stilted and melodramatic, and the dialogue is often cringe-worthy. Small narrative moments lack substance, but Type-0 does manage several exciting climactic scenes in the larger war, especially in several beautifully imagined cinematics. It's a shame that I rarely detected my own influence in shaping those events.

While the characters fail to differentiate themselves in the story, I had some fun early on exploring their abilities in battle and the distinct upgrades that shape their growth. Real-time action is the centerpiece of gameplay, and the large number of character attacks and spells keep the fights engaging for a time. However, the need to constantly dash to avoid death and the lack of reliably telegraphed enemy attacks combine to make most battles a frantic affair more defined by button-mashing than clear strategy. I'm also frustrated by not having a clear sense of the characters I should bring into any given battle, especially as early mission attrition can leave you with a team ill-equipped to handle later challenges. Lose your ranged attackers, and the many elevated enemies are a recipe for disaster.

Bosses often fall back on the tired cliché of an assured death followed by a deus ex machina-style win, including a profoundly boring and pointless final boss fight. A lackluster variation on real-time strategy crops up a few times during the adventure; the simplistic troop pathing is a time waster. A confounding combat option of substitute characters forces a choice between leveling your main characters or accepting aid from A.I. subs named after the development team for alternate rewards. Type-0 experiments with a lot of systems, but rarely perfects any of them.

Mission structure is a seesaw between combat-oriented sorties and slower-paced sequences back at the academy. With limited time between events, you need to choose whether to attend class, trigger conversation events, or venture into the open world. At first, these freeform wandering sections are fun. However, few of the side characters scattered around your home base ever coalesce into genuinely memorable personalities. Taking a class is a great tool for leveling up, but the repeated banter that signifies a class passing is inane. Leaving the academy offers an opportunity for exploration, but more often than not, it is a necessity for grinding random battles to reach higher levels. Fetch quests can only be taken one at a time, forcing endless running back and forth to turn in. Optional high-level missions provide good rewards, but the brutal absence of saving during these lengthy fights make them prohibitive.

The new-gen port is based on an original PSP title, and without more polish, the visuals are dominated by muddy textures and frequent loading. The analog stick camera rotation is more finicky and abrupt than it should be. A new lower difficulty that can be changed as the game continues is a welcome addition, offering a toned-down take on the original's potent challenge. It's too bad we lose out on the original's cooperative multiplayer, which is absent from this edition.

If you like what Type-0 has to offer, the presence of additional story and mission content offers ample reason to return for subsequent playthroughs, but it comes with the cost of having an indecipherable plot the first time through. Nods to the broader Final Fantasy lore provide a nostalgic hit, and there's lots of content to explore in Type-0. However, without a more engaging combat experience or a story that I could care about, Class Zero's adventure failed to reignite anything but a glimmer of my Final Fantasy fandom. » **Matt Miller**

6

PS4 • Xbox One

» **Concept**
Draw familiar Final Fantasy concepts into a wartime dynamic

» **Graphics**
Adapted from a Japanese PSP title, the characters and cinematics are pretty, but the visual tech is underwhelming

» **Sound**
Some compelling takes on older Final Fantasy tunes, but the English voice cast accentuates the melodramatic and embarrassing dialogue

» **Playability**
Basic game systems and controls are taught early on. You're on your own to learn the intricacies of combat and each character's potential

» **Entertainment**
An intriguing twist on long-running Final Fantasy tropes, but the experience is ultimately brought down by repetition and lackluster storytelling

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Resident Evil Revelations 2

Persevering through madness

8

PS4 • Xbox One
PS3 • 360 • PC

» Concept
Bring back fan favorites Claire and Barry alongside newcomers for a new deserted-island adventure featuring do-or-die situations

» Graphics
The character models look sharper than ever, but the sparse environments leave much to be desired

» Sound
Sound effects and music add to the terror, and the voice acting fits the characters

» Playability
The mechanics are easy to grasp, but the game could do a better job at reminding you of commands you haven't used in a while

» Entertainment
Resident Evil Revelations 2 is intriguing with memorable battles, tense action, and surprise twists. Unfortunately, it has some trouble keeping its momentum

» Replay Value
Moderate



Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** Capcom **Release** March 18 **Rating** M

The Resident Evil franchise has seen its share of ups and downs, trying to find an identity while retaining what made it popular in the first place. The first Resident Evil Revelations was a pleasant surprise, modernizing the series with faster gameplay while still embracing its horror and tension. It was Capcom's best attempt to capture both nostalgia and modern action. Resident Evil Revelations 2 continues that feat with more visceral gameplay and intense encounters. Everything feels better than its predecessor, but Revelations 2 struggles with momentum due to poor pacing and tedious puzzles.

Revelations 2 features one of the more engrossing stories in Resident Evil. A mysterious woman has trapped our heroes on a secluded island, putting them through horrific experiments. The story has two campaigns that alternate each chapter; one focuses on fan-favorite Claire and newcomer Moira, daughter of popular character Barry Burton, while another jumps forward in time, starring Barry and an enigmatic child named Natalia.

Bringing back two characters who haven't been seen for years works to the game's advantage. Finding out what they've been up to is just as interesting as discovering who's behind these heinous occurrences. Moira and Natalia also hold their own secrets and surprises. True to the series, be prepared for some crazy plot twists, laughable dialogue, and campy moments. It all comes together in a satisfying way, and every character has unique arcs and development throughout. The only issues are that the pacing feels uneven, and sometimes the game lacks explanation and a reveal jumps out of nowhere.

The Resident Evil basics haven't changed; you're still blasting through zombie hordes, corridor-crawling, managing resources, and finding a way around occasional obstacles. Combat is smooth, featuring precise and entertaining gunplay. Claire and Barry handle the guns, while Moira and Natalia work as support characters. Moira can shine her flashlight in enemies' faces to stun them or melee attack them with her crowbar, while Natalia can spot zombies through walls and throw bricks at them for damage. I enjoy how the characters' abilities work together, like having Moira use her stun so Claire can line up a headshot.

You can swap between characters with a click of a button, but a friend can also pick up a controller for local co-op. I had more fun playing solo, since Moira and Natalia have smaller combat roles and are more vulnerable, making them less fun to control long-term. The only hindrance to single-player is the poor ally A.I., which doesn't contribute well in battle. Due to bad decisions and questionable path-finding, I had some encounters where it was hard for the A.I. to survive.

Exploring the island, you discover everything from creepy prisons to grotesque meat factories. Old standbys like the woods and sewers are also in place, but they are the least exciting of the bunch. The only big knock is you're doubling up on a lot of the same environments in both campaigns, since Barry is retracing Claire and Moira's steps. Granted, Barry takes new routes through these and has some different encounters, but these places lose their mystery a second time around.

At the very least, Capcom interjects exciting situations in every chapter. My favorite moments were when I was locked in with a group of enemies rushing toward me, trying to keep the crowd under control. I also reveled in stealth-killing enemies, and enjoyed the stranger enemy types like invisible and instant-kill monsters.



I love the chaotic moments, but Revelations' weakest part is its dated puzzles. For instance, moving a power supply around on conveyor belts is tedious. These moments feel more like tacked-on busywork to prolong the episode. Thankfully, the story and intense encounters take center stage, and you only encounter a few of these boring affairs. They're forgotten as soon as they're finished, and you're back in the fun of locating the lowlife who locked you on the island.

Resident Evil Revelations 2 gets a lot right. It left me on edge and invested in the world and characters. I just wish the experience was more even, because some dips in the action hinder it. Still, trudging through the slower moments does pay off when you experience the adrenaline rush from some of the unforgettable moments. » **Kimberley Wallace**

Falling In Love With Raid Mode

I am completely engrossed in Raid mode, which allows you to build up your own iconic Resident Evil character. You take on levels with waves of enemies and collect items, such as new guns and upgrades for them. Completing stages helps level up your character; you can apply skill points and customize your guns afterward. If you want to prove your skills and feel the intensity of battle, this is the mode to play. I had a blast watching my character grow, finding better weapons, and throwing myself into insane challenges with restricted time and ammo. Raid mode gives you something to do after you've completed the main story, especially with daily challenges, medals, and extra perks.

Dark Souls II: Scholar Of The First Sin

School is back in session

GAMEINFORMER GOLD

Style 1-Player Action/Role-playing **Publisher** Bandai Namco **Developer** From Software **Release** April 7 **Rating** M

From Software's dark fantasy action/RPGs are notoriously impenetrable thanks to their steep learning curves and harsh difficulty. Last year, Dark Souls II's comparatively softer introductory hours allowed a new sect of fans to learn what makes the series so punishing and rewarding. The Scholar of the First Sin edition retains the spirit of Dark Souls II, while updating the visuals to current hardware standards, rearranging enemies and items, and packing in the previously released DLC packs.

At a glance, the dreary world of Drangleic seems the same as it did in the original, but little touches offer surprises of varying degrees to returning players. For example, a once-quiet river now has a deadly giant lumbering through it. A spire that once housed a single knight is now occupied by a dragon (a beast found much later in the original iteration). One encounter involves a big pack of undead soldiers filing out of a doorway like a deadly clown car – a lethal surprise for both newcomers and fool hardy veterans. The rearranged enemies and items offer a neat twist, but ultimately feel more like a Master Quest-style bonus mode rather than a marquee feature. Dark Souls II's original enemy layout and pacing makes it the better way to play for first-timers, though unfortunately that's not an option in Scholar of the First Sin.



Up to six players can encounter one another online now

Players who missed out on Dark Souls II's terrific DLC offerings are in luck, because all three Lost Crown packs are incorporated here. I love the enigmatic environmental puzzles, battle with a huge dragon, and other cool elements included with this post-release content. Having these add-ons available from the outset is great – even if you have to earn that access by fighting your way to them.

Dark Souls II looked great on last-gen hardware, but the occasional muddy texture or slogging framerate slightly detracted from the experience. The current-gen iterations of the game give the entire visual side a re-invigorating shot in the arm. The silky framerate smooths out the process of using the camera to pan around the environment or track enemies.

Scholar of the First Sin is best suited for two types of player: Complete Souls newcomers that insist on playing with the latest hardware, and returning warriors who soaked up every bit of new game-plus content loaded into the original. While I don't think the encounters are quite up to the level of the original, it's hard to argue with more of one of 2014's best games. » **Tim Turi**

9

PS4 • Xbox One
PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**
Rerelease Dark Souls II with updated visuals, all previously released DLC, and a remixed arrangement of enemies and items

» **Graphics**
The textures and character models are crisper, and the framereate is smoother than on last-gen consoles

» **Sound**
Lots of ambient noises, pained grunts, and snarling enemies. The sparsely used score helps accentuate intense moments

» **Playability**
The most immediately accessible of the Souls series, but the rigid, deliberate combat still requires a lot of patience from newcomers

» **Entertainment**
The new enemy arrangements don't trump the original Dark Souls II, but it's still a great jumping-on point

» **Replay Value**
High

Life Is Strange: Episode Two – Out Of Time

Taking chances and falling short

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Dontnod Entertainment **Release** March 24 **Rating** M

Life is Strange is taking chances by tackling issues of abuse, loss, and depression – not your typical video game plot material. I love that Dontnod is attempting to confront these sensitive topics, but they're also hard to portray accurately and responsibly. The second episode puts you on an emotional rollercoaster exposing you to all kinds of traumatic events. While some scenes end up raw and honest, a lot more are frustrating due to the extremism of the world and the mixed messages sent about how to handle these complicated subjects.

The episode gets off to strong start, exploring more about Maxine's mysterious power to rewind time. My favorite parts are when Maxine and her friends break into theories to explain it, such as pointing to quantum physics. Besides discovering more about her power, Maxine also deals with a social group called the Vortex Club that's become all the rage, but secrets about drugs and sex lurk below the surface, making Maxine determined to get the root of it.

The whole set-up is absurd. At times, I felt like I was watching a poorly written teenage drama on The CW. Everything functions to increase the melodrama, even if it's outlandishly unrealistic. The first episode had some clichés, but the second goes so far that it's difficult to take seriously.

The extreme circumstances and characters are the most frustrating parts. Authority figures don't respond to situations as they should, ignoring the obvious in front of them. This can happen in reality, but almost every adult in Life is Strange does this. Maxine feels like the only rational person in the game.

On a better note, Dontnod is doing a good job at making choices carry over. I enjoyed how the little things, like erasing mean messages on an acquaintance's whiteboard, mattered in a later conversation. Small decisions also factor into sweeping choices like whether or not you save someone's life. However, I also experienced some inconsistencies in how characters reacted. For instance, in one scene, a character notes I care about her and that she's going to join me, but then the next line of dialogue has her doing the opposite, saying nobody cares about her.

Outside of building relationships and making choices, the basic point-and-click exploration and puzzles provide the bulk of the gameplay. Small puzzles make sense in the context of the story, like proving your powers to Chloe with basic memory games. However, one puzzle drove me nuts: locating five bottles in a large junkyard. Looking for a needle in a haystack is rarely fun, and that's the case here.



Even with everything that bothered me in this episode, I'm still invested in where Maxine's story is headed. Life is Strange has plenty of potential left, and Dontnod is making choices matter. However, characters and circumstances need to be more natural and plausible for me to buy into this world. » **Kimberley Wallace**

6.5

PS4 • Xbox One
PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**
Continue to watch Maxine experiment with her time-manipulation power and navigate a corrupt world

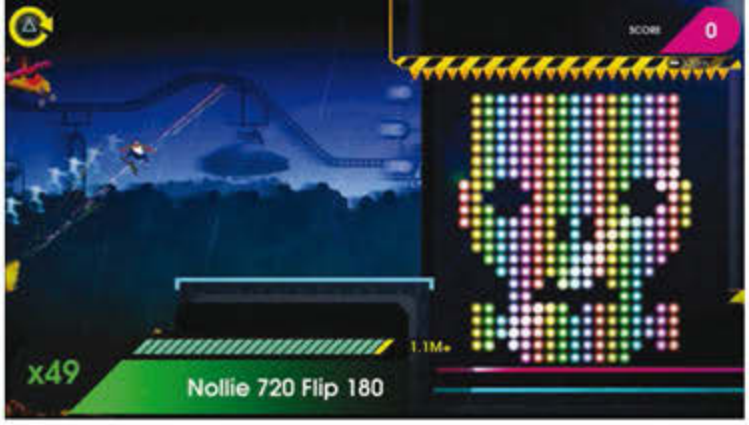
» **Graphics**
Life is Strange has its own style, and every character dresses to accentuate their personality. The backdrops are pretty standard, but help paint a more realistic world

» **Sound**
The indie music featured is fantastic and I love how the tracks propel emotional moments like a movie or TV Show

» **Playability**
Life is Strange is basically exploration, dialogue choices, and point-and-click controls, making everything easy to grasp

» **Entertainment**
While the second episode is flawed, I'm still invested in these characters and curious how things will turn out

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high



OlliOlli2: Welcome To Olliwood

Going back to your favorite skate spot

8

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Roll7 **Developer** Roll7
Release March 3 **Rating** E

PS4 • Vita

» Concept
New tricks (including the combo-stretching manual) and levels add to the formula

» Graphics
The visuals are vibrant, but as much they jump off the screen, they never distract you from performing tricks

» Sound
New songs are opened up when you unlock new levels

» Playability
The new moves slot easily into the already smooth trick system

» Entertainment
The additions to this addictive series don't radically change what it is about, but rather plug into what the series is already doing well

» Replay Value
High

The additions to OlliOlli2 are nothing eye-catching. Manuals and reverts are unsurprising new moves for the fast-paced skateboarding game. They fit in nicely but don't redefine the core experience or shake up the game's feature set. In fact, there are things I would include on a list of necessities for the franchise that are not in Welcome to Olliwood. Nevertheless, this sequel has improved the series in ways I didn't think possible.

OlliOlli2 fulfills a modicum of sequel objectives: More tricks and levels augment the gameplay foundation of the first title. As bland as this sounds, the new tricks in conjunction with the level objectives and design create an experience that drills down into the addictiveness of the gameplay even more than the last game.

Using manuals to stitch together one single, giant combo through a level is not necessary to unlock the next stage, but your fingers will be itching to do so, along with busting as many tricks as possible in between. The game goads you by giving you new tricks that make high-score seekers out of novice players, while still raising the bar for seasoned trick technicians. Even though you can unlock the next stage just by surviving to the end of a level, fulfilling all of the objectives opens up a pro-level stage with all-new environments, and there's also the challenge of the returning RAD difficulty level and Daily Grind and Spots asynchronous online modes.

Regardless of whether you choose to tackle the game's more difficult aspect or not, OlliOlli2 succeeds because the levels – in conjunction with the runner-like platforming flow – are well designed. Special launch ramps require timing to bridge chasms of death and reach secret areas, and the placement of grindable rails is done for both challenge and their high-score possibilities. In a testament to this, I even had fun going through levels without busting tricks and just trying to survive – and even that isn't easy.

I would have liked customization features, more interactive levels, and a way to create my own level. Even without them, OlliOlli 2 is a fun game that, in its own way, reaffirms what made the first one such a good time. » **Matthew Kato**



Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number

Brutality at its most rewarding

gamerinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Devolver Digital
Developer Dennaton Games **Release** March 10 **Rating** M



8.5

PS4 • Vita • PC

» Concept
Take the foundation of Hotline Miami and add new characters, another enjoyable story, and a pile of dead bodies several stories high

» Graphics
The retro graphics are charming in their brutality, but sometimes cause problems during gameplay

» Sound
The pulse-pounding soundtrack is matched only by the pulse-pounding gameplay

» Playability
Executing a well-planned assault is satisfying, and the tight controls make that possible

» Entertainment
Frustration gives way to fun and fulfillment as failure turns to success

» Replay Value
Moderate

Hotline Miami players know the frustration of being defeated close to the end of a stage. In Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number, that all-too-familiar feeling is amplified. Being tasked with emptying a room full of enemies in a game where every character – even yours – is killed in one hit is daunting. However, overcoming these trials grants a strong feeling of fulfillment to those who have the patience to earn it.

Hotline Miami 2 delivers a brutally graphic and action-packed experience that does little to stray from the formula of its predecessor. The sequel delivers more levels within its enjoyable story, as well as more playable characters with their own abilities.

These abilities, which are selectable based on the stage, give you different ways to approach a level. For example, one loadout lets you dual-wield machine guns, but when that wasn't getting the job done for me I switched to one that gave me the ability to roll dodge underneath enemy fire.

Hotline Miami 2 is a frustratingly difficult game, but it's undeniably fair. Even though small issues involving the retro graphics and a doorway glitch occur, they don't cause the foundation to crumble. Frustration often takes hold due to lost progress following a death, but the process for applying lessons learned eases the difficulty curve in future attempts.

Applying these lessons is where Hotline Miami 2 is at its most rewarding. With no telling who or what lurks just out of sight, trial-and-error plays a major role, giving gameplay a puzzle-like feel within the framework of a challenging and fast-paced top-down action shooter. Each death adds to mounting frustration, but each completed level transmutes that frustration into a sense of accomplishment.

Another area that does not let down fans is the soundtrack, as the music of Hotline Miami 2 is a highlight of the experience. The electronic music fits the adrenaline-pumping feeling of working your way through an enemy-infested area, just as the calming music following a completed level complements the relieved breath I let out each time I succeed in my mission.

The unrivaled sense of relief that comes from completing an area is a testament to how well-designed each level is. Though it is not for the faint of heart, Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number provides thrills at the occasional and momentary cost of your sanity. Though you'll likely find yourself screaming at your screen on a regular basis, you're equally as likely to find yourself eagerly loading the next level. » **Brian Shea**



Bloodborne

A macabre masterpiece

gamefromer GAME OF THE MONTH gamefromer PLATINUM

Style 1-Player Action/Role-playing **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer From Software **Release** March 24 **Rating** M

9.75

PS4

» **Concept**
Hunt through the night in the cursed city of Yharnam in search of a cure

» **Graphics**
Beautiful backdrops and environments bring the horror to life

» **Sound**
Groans, shrieks, and the sound of bells punctuate the journey. The amazing soundtrack highlights everything from the serene and peaceful to adrenaline-fueled boss battles

» **Playability**
You get some instruction at the beginning, but players learn new things the whole way through. A difficult and demanding single-player experience with multiplayer components that can provide solace for those who seek it

» **Entertainment**
An unsettling, Lovecraftian adventure through nightmares that constantly tests and enthralls the player. Just when you think you have things figured out, new elements come into play

» **Replay Value**
High

Laughter of the mad surrounds you as the blood moon rises over the top of a damned city. You tighten your grip on the controller and your stress level rises as a terrifying visage approaches in the distance, unearthly aberrations sprouting from its squirming limbs. Soon the laughter of the mad is yours; the impossible battle you have finally managed to obtain a fraction of control over takes an unexpected turn, and you realize how little you know. Welcome to Bloodborne, where death and insanity lurk around every dark corner and nothing is as it seems.

You are a tourist in From Software's mad dreamscape, and your journey through this atmospheric masterpiece leaves you unsettled and craving more. You face the impossible and the unreal, and through prowess and persistence, you overcome the nightmares with an unrivaled sense of achievement and satisfaction. Yes, the game is as challenging as a Souls title (also made by From Software), but just as with that series, multiplayer options and player progression can provide methods for anyone to triumph.

From Software's action/RPG is a shining example of fantastic gameplay combined with terror. Its introductory hours are rooted in traditional horror tropes, rife with werewolves and twisted humans in the cursed city of Yharnam. The tale takes a turn for the weird and the wonderful as the true plot is revealed layer by layer, an esoteric and eldritch trek through a luxurious Lovecraftian yarn. Never before has From's dark fantasy setting been so intimately realized, with strong visuals and atmosphere, and the switch to a pure horror aesthetic allows the studio to embrace aspects that have only been subtly injected in previous titles.

Combat is deliberate like the Souls series, but faster and focused on a razor-sharp balance. Offense is rewarded and passivity punished. The best defense is a good offense, whether you're landing precise blows with the threaded cane or heavy impact slams with the tombstone-on-a-sword Kirkhammer. The regain system encourages this – as enemies cut into your life, you have a window to gain back many of the lost hit points by returning blows within a short time frame.

Your adventure is steeped in exploration through Bloodborne's vast interconnected world, unlocking shortcuts and learning. Through every death you obtain critical knowledge you can use to avoid the same fate on your next attempt, and those deaths come often.

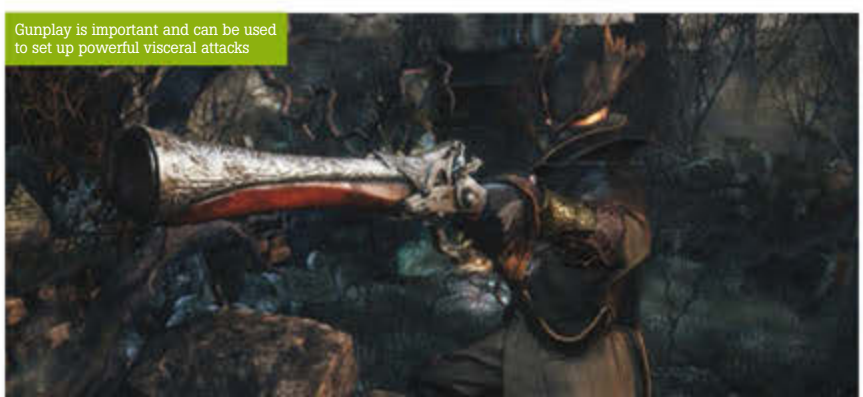
You have many opportunities to select new weapons, level up, purchase new armor, and equip runes and blood gems to customize your character. While the selection of weapons isn't vast, the customization options and the fact that most weapons have "trick" settings that allow it to function as essentially two completely different entities should curb any associated woes. The loot ramp up, while slow, is satisfying as you cobble together different combinations, tailoring certain builds to better face certain encounters or zones.

The boss battles are fascinating, some built on special gimmicks or setpieces. Each functions as its own special battle, with few uninteresting or generic monstrosities; many bosses serve up multi-phase encounters that transition from the understandable and controllable to crazed transformations with cosmic terrors. These battles sync up incredibly well with the overarching themes of the game – keep your cool as the music and tension rise, and you shall emerge soaked in blood as fiends fall before you. Battles with other NPC hunters can often be as thrilling as boss fights – with guns blasting and swords swinging in a frenzy – and a single mistimed maneuver can be the difference between victory and defeat.

If you're having trouble playing solo, you can call in friends (or random players) to help. You can also invade others' games, providing they have enabled the option. These aspects are great for players having trouble with certain bosses, or those that want to explore Chalice Dungeons. These come in several flavors: locked-configuration endeavors that have set bosses and areas, and procedurally generated dungeons that can be shared with friends. These continuing challenges add a lot of longevity to the game outside of the traditional new game plus.

If there are any qualms about Bloodborne, it is the long load times associated with entering new areas or death – waiting to respawn can become quite irksome during the frequent, inevitable deaths that go along with playing the game.

Bloodborne is a blood-drenched horror gem that has only the faintest of cracks in its façade. From Software succeeds through sparse storytelling, lush atmospheres (conjuring up notions of the best of Lovecraft's work), and tight combat that forces you to be aggressive. While this new IP doesn't stray far from the established Souls franchise, it is a magical, wondrous work that admirably instills both terror and triumph in those brave enough to delve into it. » **Daniel Tack**



Gunplay is important and can be used to set up powerful visceral attacks

Axiom Verge

What's old is new

9.25

PS4

» Concept
The most Metroid-like Metroid clone out there, yet it stands apart with plenty of unique and creative elements

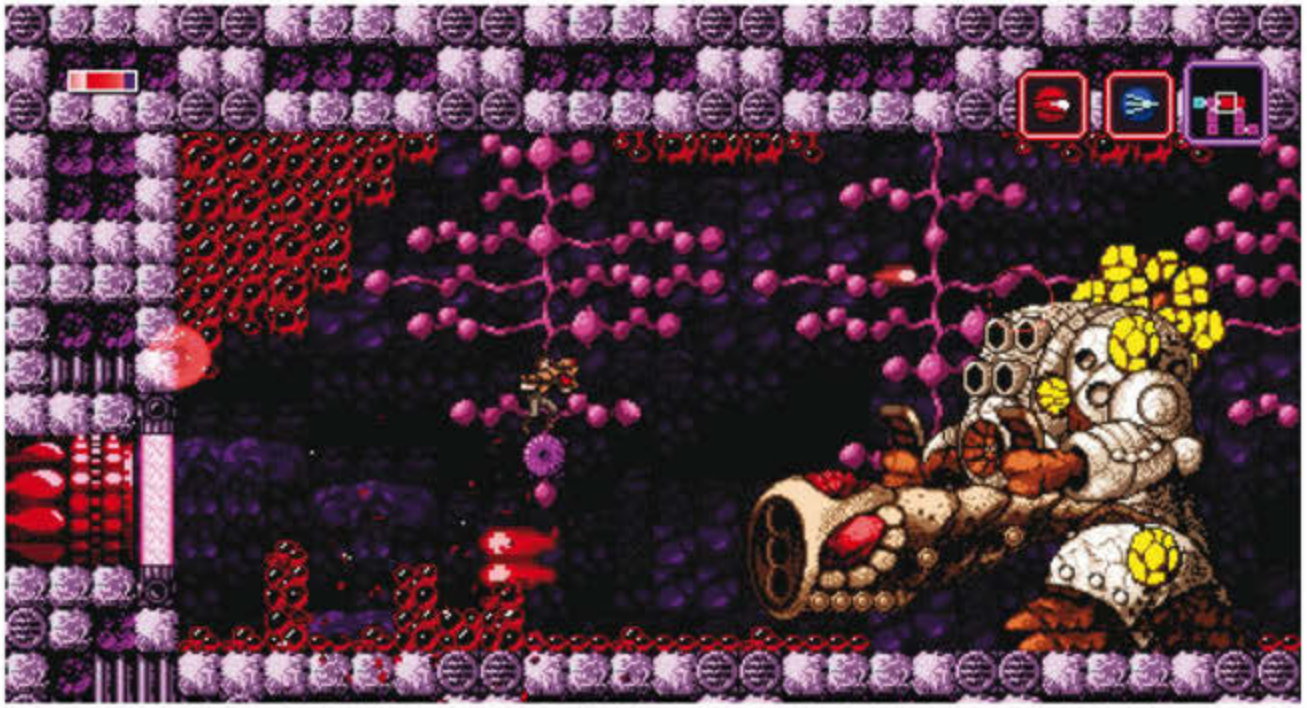
» Graphics
Visuals capture the feel of an old NES/SNES game, but massive boss battles and other flourishes far exceed the retro systems' capabilities

» Sound
Though clearly taking inspiration from Metroid, it has a vivid, creepy soundscape without becoming a tribute act

» Playability
Basic jumping and shooting evolves to surprising mechanical depth

» Entertainment
It draws you in with nostalgia and slaps you with innovation when you think you know what's next

» Replay Value
Moderately high



gamerinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Tom Happ **Developer** Tom Happ **Release** March 31 **ESRB** T

Metroid fans have been waiting in agony for a new 2D entry in the series since 2004's Zero Mission on Game Boy Advance. In the meantime, several fans have gone into development and created their own Metroid-style games. There have been great attempts and bad ones, but no one has tried to capture the aesthetic of Metroid as closely as Axiom Verge. Handling programming, art, animation, and music, developer Tom Happ has created a stunning love letter to Nintendo's classic without being a slave to its conventions.

Your character, Trace, is conducting an experiment in his lab in the middle of the night. Something goes wrong, and there is a terrible explosion. He wakes up in a strange place, enlisted to help massive (but barely functional) robots.

The world is one massive, interconnected cave network. Each zone has a unique identity, theme song, and enemy roster. The first area is the most direct homage to Metroid, with small creatures creeping along the ground and ceiling and swarms of bugs dive-bombing you. There are even bubble clusters that disappear and reform when you attack. While the Metroid DNA runs through every environment, at no point does it feel like a retread through Zebes.

Straightforward hallways and vertical shafts are mixed in with puzzles and gates that prevent you from passing until you return with a new ability. Axiom Verge has no waypoints or dots to remind you of an out-of-reach power-up. I wish I would have taken more notes along the way; returning to nab power-ups or figure out where to go next can get confusing and frustrating. However, I don't necessarily want to stop the flow of gameplay to sketch out secrets on graph paper every 10 minutes.

The tools and gameplay mechanics tie into the Metroid classics while offering their own twist. Instead of using bombs to open secret areas, Trace has a versatile plasma drill that doubles as a melee attack option. Rather than rolling up into a ball to squeeze into tight spaces, you send out a small drone to do the dirty work. This little fella can skitter a seemingly endless distance away from its master, sometimes completing longer puzzle challenge areas all on its own. Since it has its own health bar and can die and regenerate infinitely, the drone also serves as a helpful scout in dangerous areas or when you're low on health. It even gets in on platforming in an intriguing way I won't spoil here. On top of this, there's the Address Disruptor, which is a fancy term for a glitch gun. This beam alters the behavior and properties of enemies in various surprising ways, and can form platforms to jump on or disintegrate walls blocking your path. This signature mechanic always kept me guessing and experimenting with its effects.

The large weapon arsenal goes beyond anything I've seen in the genre. The variety on display is more akin to Contra or shoot-em-ups than the comparatively limited Metroid arsenal. In the first hour or so, you already have three or four vastly different guns. It starts with a standard pea shooter, but eventually you have a gun for every situation – a shotgun, spread gun, fireballs, bouncy shots, a lightning shot, and so much more. Each gun changes the way you play, but I rarely switched once I found the homing missiles. I had a great time with the weapon, but part of me felt like I was cheating. The weapon wheel tied to the right stick makes quick swapping easy, but I found myself frequently hitting it either accidentally or when I forgot this wasn't a twin-stick shooter, causing an annoying pause to the action (other less ideal control options exist as well).

Bosses range from creatures like a scorpion or wasp to a massive laser-blasting plant to a humanoid soldier similar to the Cabal in Destiny. They hit the sweet spot for me where it takes a couple deaths to figure out their patterns and weak spots, but I could get further each time until scoring a victory. Some fights skew toward reflex skills, others serve as high-pressure puzzles, and for some it's just a matter of finding the perfect gun for the job.

Most surprising is the rich story, which is often neglected in this genre. It begins simply, but eventually twists into scientific theory and ruminates on the nature of reality and the needs of the few versus the many. Through collectible messages and translation keys, players can dig deeper into the rabbit hole. Just like every other fine detail, Happ has clearly plotted out this fiction and doesn't settle for overly minimalist or family murder revenge tropes. The result is at times confusing, but ultimately satisfying.

Throughout my time with Axiom Verge I was constantly excited to explore strange worlds, gain game-changing powerups, and fire off a new gun for the first time. Almost everything you pick up feels meaningful, unlike collecting overabundant missile-capacity expansions that you don't even need. I heartily applaud Tom Happ's first solo effort. It's incredible that he was able to nail every component of game creation in one package. I'll wait as long as it takes for him to build a follow-up. When everything works this well, why let someone else get in there and screw it up? » **Bryan Vore**

Speedrunners Welcome

Axiom Verge includes a version of the game completely tuned for speedrunning. All cutscenes are excised, minor randomized elements standardized, and a timer constantly runs up in the corner. It even keeps track of what time you killed each boss to see if you're on pace to best your previous record. Livestreaming via built-in PS4 Twitch support is highly encouraged.



Homeworld Remastered

Reliving the sci-fi past of a strategy legend

Style 1-Player Strategy (8-player online) **Publisher** Gearbox Software **Developer** Gearbox Software **Release** February 17 **Rating** E10+

Homeworld is fondly remembered as one of the frontrunners of the real-time strategy genre, and allowed players to engage with the RTS in fascinating 3D space for the first time. While we may still be hungry for a new title in the series, this remaster does plenty to whet the appetite as it serves up a comforting, nostalgic meal with some new garnish.

The Homeworld Remastered Collection gives players access to remastered versions of Homeworld and Homeworld 2 along with classic editions of each game. Returning to titles that harken back to another era of PC gaming is a bit surreal, but I enjoyed revisiting a time when real-time strategy was one of the most popular and exciting genres.

In the fully 3D setting of Homeworld, you participate in traditional resource gathering and collecting, building up formations and forces, and skirmishing with enemy forces in a variety of situations. From strategic combat to inventive units, everything that made the originals fun to play is here in full force. Of particular note that's uncommon in the genre is that you retain a persistent fleet through the campaign, keeping resources from mission to mission; expect to get attached to your ships, which makes dangerous encounters even more intense.

The campaigns of both Homeworld and Homeworld 2 hold up today, though some remnants of older design are still intact – things like long, repetitive, slow, and boring missions. But for the most part, the story is interesting, especially in the first game, as you command the Kushan against the Taiidan in a quest to find your homeworld. For new players to the titles, the trial-and-error missions might be frustrating, but if you're at the table to play a remastered real-time strategy game, you can weather the asteroid storms.



The original Homeworld is more focused on story, while Homeworld 2 adds more bells and whistles in terms of gameplay and technical improvements, but both games produce worthwhile experiences today thanks to the overhaul. They are loyal to the source material and look more enticing thanks to the substantial visual upgrade, though I can't help but wish that Gearbox had brought some new things to the table beyond adding polish to existing content.

Though it looks great, this remastering is far from free of bugs and other quirks, ranging from random minor gameplay instances (like formation issues and bizarre targeting logic) to hard crashes. While these did not detract significantly from my playthroughs of either game, you shouldn't plan on an entirely smooth journey through the stars.

Homeworld Remastered technically has a multiplayer component that melds together elements of the online modes of Homeworld 1 and 2, but it is currently in beta. Games are difficult to come by online and feature an assortment of bugs (crashing) and other issues that could use some looking into (rejoining dropped/crashed games). If online play is a major draw for you, wait until this mode has been polished, stabilized, and officially released. As it stands, pick this collection up only if you are content with the two remastered core titles.

If you never experienced the Homeworld titles during their initial runs this collection is a great way to take a look at an incredible RTS experience in a world that sees the genre waning. The package does a dutiful job providing classic versions of both titles as well, so if you're a purist or you just want to compare and contrast versions, they're great to take a peek at and a welcome bonus. » **Daniel Tack**

8

PC

» **Concept**
Experience the classic real-time strategy games of PC yesteryear

» **Graphics**
An impressive overhaul admirably brings these games into the modern age

» **Sound**
New music and effects bolster a strong soundtrack from the past

» **Playability**
Positioning ships for combat and learning the rock-paper-scissors relationships take some getting used to, but the Homeworld series is generally accessible for the genre

» **Entertainment**
Thanks to graphic and audio enhancements alongside a few quality of life changes, Homeworld is still an enjoyable experience

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Cities: Skylines

Building toward something meaningful

gamefan SILVER

Style 1-Player Simulation **Publisher** Paradox Interactive
Developer Colossal Order **Release** March 10 **Rating** NR



8.75

PC

» Concept
An untethered city builder that addresses complaints fans have had from other franchises

» Graphics
Whether you're looking down on your empire or zooming in on a single building, the visuals give plenty of personality to your city

» Sound
Generic music adds little to the experience, but hearing the sounds of a busy city goes a long way to make the world feel alive

» Playability
Despite a few minor glitches, the interface does a great job of letting you build the city of your dreams

» Entertainment
Addicting and rewarding, this is the best game the genre has seen in years

» Replay Value
High

Many games task you with destroying, while very few have you create in meaningful ways. With city-builders, developers have taken different paths to deliver this experience, but they've always stood in the shadow of the king of city-building franchises: SimCity.

Cities: Skylines not only elevates past SimCity's once-towering reputation, it casts a massive shadow of its own. With no online requirement, Cities: Skylines allows players to build the city of their dreams – provided they have the skills to make it last.

Each city starts with a small plot of land to develop, with nothing but natural resources and a nearby highway. Paving roads and placing power and water grids is priority, and building this infrastructure is intuitive and enjoyable.

The tutorial pop-ups instruct how to get by without holding your hand, setting the tone for the experience. Cities: Skylines provides the tools to be successful, but it's up to you to put them to use. Don't disregard the stats, charts, and social-media posts at your disposal, or things may go quickly downhill. It took me several attempts to create a city with longevity after I found my bearings and developed a budget.

Whether you're zoomed out to view a large chunk of land or pulled up to a single building, the visuals and sounds give the world character. People move around, airplanes fly by, and traffic behaves in a realistic manner (developer Colossal Order also made the transportation-focused sim Cities in Motion).

A viable city enabled me to explore the deep leveling system, which is tied to the number of residents. Each level grants additional zoning options, buildings, and policies that you can set. It's slightly annoying that much of the content is locked behind this system, but its rewarding nature kept me playing.

Unfortunately, my desire to hastily unlock the next level made me overly ambitious, and my citizens paid the price. As I continued expanding through purchasable plots of land, I looked back to find my once-bustling metropolis all but wiped out thanks to a poor decision on my part.

Despite my frustration, that demonstrates Cities: Skylines' most positive aspect: Every success and failure is due to your actions. Each fallen city represents potential for the next one to be better, giving players reason to start a new city immediately after ending another.

Through deep and rewarding gameplay, Colossal Order's simulation fills the increasingly noticeable void in the genre. Where others have failed, Cities: Skyline excels and delivers the new gold standard of modern city-builders. » **Brian Shea**

Mod-Friendly

The mod-friendly nature of Cities: Skylines sets it apart from other notable city-builders. As of now, the mod tools merely allow for creation of new assets and plots of land, but with these custom items and maps shareable through Steam, the replay-ability could shoot through the roof if it gains traction within the community.



Mario Vs. Donkey Kong: Tipping Stars

The rivalry returns to its roots

Style 1-Player Puzzle **Publisher** Nintendo
Developer Nintendo Software Technology
Release March 5 **Rating** E

8

Wii U • 3DS

» Concept
Take the Mario vs. Donkey Kong series back to its classic 2D puzzle gameplay

» Graphics
The simple and colorful toys, traps, and gadgets haven't changed much visually (or otherwise) from previous entries

» Sound
Several songs and sound effects are familiar, but World 6's piano theme stands out

» Playability
Touchscreen controls are responsive, and scanning larger levels with the circle pad (or left analog stick on Wii U) works smoothly

» Entertainment
By trimming the fat and focusing on solid puzzle gameplay, Nintendo turns in another good entry. Some fans, however, may be disappointed in the lack of new trinkets to play with

» Replay Value
Moderately high

After 2013's misguided Mario and Donkey Kong: Minis on the Move top-down 3D offshoot, Nintendo has decided to stop messing with the formula and return to the 2D puzzle gameplay that made this series a cult favorite. It's been five years since players guided auto-moving toy versions of the Mario cast through levels filled with traps, and it feels good to be back.

Fans of the series will instantly recognize the look, sounds, and gadgets used in Tipping Stars. In many ways, it's similar to Mini-Land Mayhem, with red girder platforms, purple conveyor belts, warp pipes, and jump springs. If you've just played the previous 2D entry, it might not feel as fresh, but the controls are tight, puzzles creative, and difficulty curve fair.

The new Cursed Mini Mario is controlled by an evil robo monkey and roams around the map looking to smash your other toys. It's interesting to figure out how to trap him and have another toy smash off the parasite with a classic DK mallet. This stage type replaces the uneven boss battles of previous entries, and fits more naturally into the puzzle flow of the game. The disposable minigames seen in past entries are also nowhere to be found.

The title of the game comes from the expanded online level creation system and social features. If you make a cool level and others enjoy it, they can "tip" you star currency, which you can spend on creation upgrades and cosmetic tweaks. Players earn Miiverse stamps for giving out tips to discourage hoarding. Filters surface the best user content, and Nintendo also offers new official stages. Naturally, it's slim pickings on launch day, but I'm looking forward to seeing what the masses do over time.

While Tipping Stars could use more new elements to freshen things up, the levels remain enjoyable nonetheless. The lack of extraneous minigames and boss battles keeps the focus where it should be – right on the puzzles. » **Bryan Vore**

The Edge

The Wii U version has better visuals and sound, and the game-pad provides more real estate to work with on its larger touchscreen. The 3DS version has the advantage of portability. Fortunately, players won't have to choose as they'll get both versions of the game with their purchase.



Xenoblade Chronicles 3D

Another chance to experience JRPG greatness

gamesinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Role-playing **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Monolith Soft, Monster Games **Release** April 10 **Rating** T



9

New 3DS

» Concept
Search high and low for answers behind the Monado sword and put a stop to vicious Mechon invading the lands

» Graphics
The graphics weren't all that impressive on the Wii, and that hasn't changed. However, being in such a vibrant and imaginative world is exciting

» Sound
This is one of the most memorable RPG soundtracks of recent years. Every track paints the world wonderfully and battle music keeps you inspired

» Playability
Despite a lot of early tutorials, eventually everything clicks and you're in the groove

» Entertainment
Xenoblade innovates, while also remembering the things people adore about the genre

» Replay Value
Moderate

Xenoblade Chronicles reminds me of why I fell in love with RPGs in the first place. From the thrill of stepping into a vast land with endless possibilities to the surge of a hard-fought battle against larger-than-life creatures, Xenoblade holds plenty of excitement. Even now, three years after the original release on Wii, the journey is as fun as I remember. Xenoblade Chronicles 3D is your chance to find out what you missed, or remind yourself why you hold the game in high regard.

If you are a returning player, that desire to experience the adventure again has to be your primary motivation for delving into this version; don't expect to see an array of new features or additional content here. This is a great game, but it remains largely unchanged. The jump to handheld works well, and the controls feel like a natural fit. The only enhancements are minor, like StreetPass and Amiibo support, helping you earn tokens faster to unlock extra music and 3D models. The lack of ambition in the rerelease might be disappointing for some fans, but it doesn't change the fantastic game at the core.

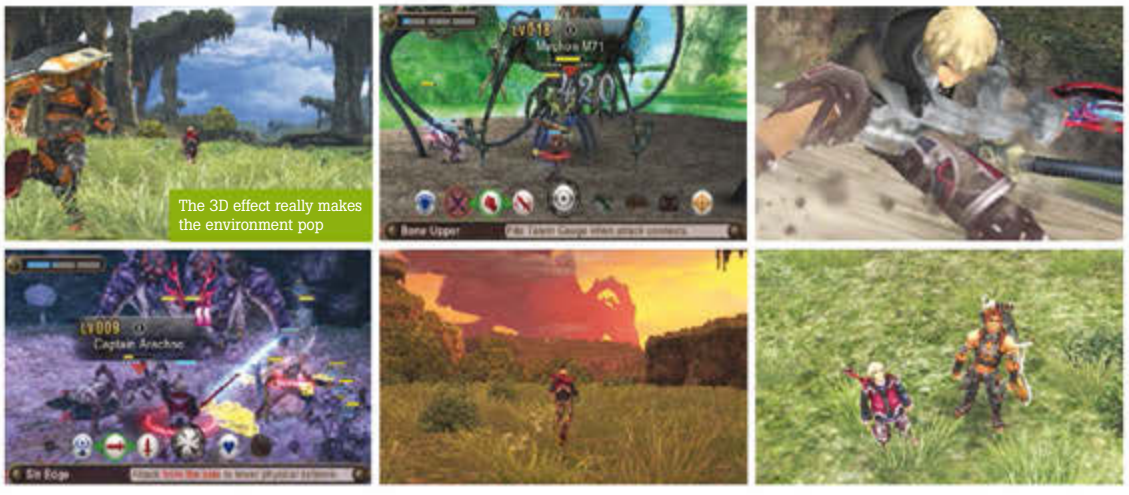
Xenoblade is an imaginative fusion of RPG traditions and new ideas. From the combat to the setting, you encounter a mix of the familiar and surprising at every turn. You're journeying across colonies that rest upon the backs of warring giants. Grasslands, flowing rivers, and waterfalls surround you, and I had fun exploring the map. The world has its own story to uncover, and finding out the history of the warring giants and even the mysterious Monado is exciting.

The cast isn't particularly memorable – Shulk is a typical "boy with a destiny" – but their interactions can be compelling. I love how harmonious everything feels between your party members; tracking down special places to have heart-to-heart chats levels up your relationship, and encouraging party members or reviving them on the battlefield raises your friendship. This builds a sense of connection among your party, and also earns you extra skills and permanent buffs that pay off in combat.

Xenoblade has one of the best battle systems in recent years. It's a cross between action and tactical combat, something more akin to an MMORPG. You have characters that fit the tank, helper, and DPS roles, and victory comes through allies performing their tasks well. You control one person in a party of three; your character automatically attacks while you manage special abilities on cooldowns. Not having to constantly tap a button is a nice change of pace, and keeps you focused on more strategic matters. Positioning is important – land a special attack from behind and reap the damage rewards. This is all wrapped up in a fun upgrade system that allows you to pick which skills you want to pack the biggest punch.

One of my favorite parts of Xenoblade is how it uses a plot device to enhance its gameplay. Shulk has the ability to see the future, which plays into battle. Before an enemy is going to deliver a deadly hit, Shulk is able to see that fatal moment, allowing him to prepare for it by warning his teammates and putting up shields. This mechanic adds tension and urgency; I loved knowing when a big attack was coming and rushing to thwart it.

Xenoblade Chronicles remains a must-play RPG. While this version doesn't do anything special to entice old fans to return, it still holds the same fun it did the first time around. Don't let it pass you by again if it did previously; this world captivates and takes hold of your like a great game should. » **Kimberley Wallace**



Code Name: S.T.E.A.M.

Tense strategy and Honest Abe

8

3DS

» Concept
Enlist with famous figures to help Abraham Lincoln put a stop to extraterrestrials sweeping the world

» Graphics
The comic-style art is vibrant, imaginative, and looks great in 3D. Seeing reimagined historical and fictional figures is a bonus

» Sound
The sound gets the job done, but it's overused. The voice acting is weak; characters sound too exaggerated and repetitive

» Playability
The game eases you into its tougher mechanics, and each level comes with hints. Some of the later stages are unforgiving, coming down to pure luck

» Entertainment
I had a blast besting stages, but the game loses momentum with lengthy enemy turns

» Replay Value
Moderate



Style 1 or 2-Player Strategy **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Intelligent Systems **Release** March 13 **ESRB** T

Intelligent Systems is one of my favorite developers. Best known for Advanced Wars and Fire Emblem, it has continued to make top-tier strategy games for decades. This studio has a knack for creating tension, making you battle for every victory. Code Name: S.T.E.A.M. retains many of the developer's signature strengths, but interruptions in the action tarnish the fun.

Intelligent Systems went all-out with something completely different for this new IP. Code Name: S.T.E.A.M.'s premise is delightfully zany: You're recruited by Abraham Lincoln to defeat invading extraterrestrials. Along the way, you enlist the help of new teammates from classics such as *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Unfortunately, the narrative is rarely exciting and functions more to set up your next alien pursuit. Don't expect fun conversations between characters or kooky antics to match the offbeat premise.

Thankfully, the actual missions are exciting. Intelligent Systems has provided a delightfully fun battle system. Steam power dictates everything you do, from your movement to launching an attack. Once you're out of steam, you can't take any more actions. However, you don't have to use all your steam in a turn; leaving some in a tank means that if an enemy gets in your line-of-sight, you can launch a devastating counterattack. I enjoyed playing around with this system and contemplating every turn. If I didn't want to waste steam traveling to enemies, I just waited until they came to me, then counterattacked. On the other hand, if I knew I had enough power to kill an enemy, I wouldn't hold back.

Code Name: S.T.E.A.M.'s biggest assets are its variety and unpredictability. Some missions require you to escort characters or detonate bombs in a certain number of turns, while others have you holding off a huge monster from storming your base. Going through the story mode, you unlock new characters that can change your battle strategy left and right. You can only pick four characters to have on the battlefield at once, but each brings something unique to the table, like sniping or providing your party extra steam.

My favorite part is how thought-intensive every battle becomes. Positioning is extremely important, and one rash move can be costly. Maps challenge you with different enemies and terrain, and sometimes you can't prepare for what's ahead. Foes often call for reinforcements and special enemies can't be attacked (but flood you with heavy damage if you end your turn in their proximity). Paying attention to enemy types is important because they all pose their own threats, such as stunning your army or healing their buddies. I was addicted to beating every mission, seeking out the best vantage points, trying out new characters, and defeating massive bosses.

Code Name: S.T.E.A.M. is full of fun strategy, but its lethargic pace can take you out of the experience. Maps are lengthy (some can take 20 turns), but this is exacerbated for a few reasons. First off, you must watch every enemy in a level take its turn. You can't skip it or speed it up. It adds some tension watching the enemy close in and knowing where they are, but half of the time you can't even get a clear look at the enemy due to the camera angles getting blocked by objects in the environment.

To add insult to injury, what you're looking at when the enemy acts is rarely exciting, diminishing your enthusiasm for the battle at hand. Foes also take too much time to execute their actions in later maps when there are tons of enemies on the battlefield. I've never been annoyed with watching enemies in a strategy game before, but other titles make them play out quickly or give you an option to speed them up.

During my time in Code Name: S.T.E.A.M., I globetrotted to cool places like Buckingham Palace, Washington, D.C., and fictional locations I won't spoil. The world is cool and exciting, and it kept me thinking more about my actions than most games, yet some things really hinder the adventure. The game could use more personality, and the long enemy-turn time can ruin the experience. Code Name: S.T.E.A.M. has plenty to love, but it also falls short in keeping all moments thrilling and tense. » **Kimberley Wallace**





Etrian Mystery Dungeon

Randomized familiar fun

Style 1-Player Role-playing **Publisher** Atlus **Developer** Spike Chunsoft, Atlus **Release** April 7 **Rating** E10+

8

3DS

» **Concept**
Take the characters, classes, and style of the Etrian Odyssey franchise and infuse them with Mystery Dungeon elements

» **Graphics**
Well-suited to the dungeon crawl but nothing special

» **Sound**
Appropriate spell-blasts and special abilities with a soundtrack that doesn't grow tiresome over the long haul

» **Playability**
Learning the quirks of player control in this unique mashup can take some time, but it's not overbearing. The game's layers open up in an accessible way over time

» **Entertainment**
While not as strong as a core Odyssey title, this blending of games succeeds in being challenging, lighthearted, and entertaining

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

The Etrian Odyssey series has kept the pure dungeon crawl alive and well on the 3DS while mixing things up by bringing its classic core into interesting franchise mash-ups such as Persona Q. This time around, the Mystery Dungeon series is integrated for a new tactical take on Etrian Odyssey, now with with roguelike elements and unpredictability from floor to floor of sprawling dungeons.

Your party is composed of classic Etrian Odyssey classes (and the new wanderer class) that level up and acquire skills via a talent tree, and you fill up your guild slots back in town with additional characters and classes. You take your team of four into randomized dungeons, picking up assorted loot drops, consumables, and mana. Your party takes damage for every square traveled if you don't have sustenance, but this restriction is never an issue unless you're trying to exploit situations.

The biggest divergence in gameplay from the core series is the turn-based tactical combat. Except on boss fights, you're only able to choose moves for your selected character, and you swap between characters a lot – potentially every single turn. The rest of your crew performs automated moves based on what you have selected and trained for them. You create plenty of skill shortcuts to streamline the process, but switching between characters constantly on rough floors gets repetitive. The automated aspects of combat make getting through trivial floors a breeze, but I often stared in resigned frustration as my A.I. allies made poor choices during hard fights.





As you proceed through deeper and more elaborate dungeons, reaching the boss becomes a daunting prospect. To handle this, you create forts to "lock" a floor from its regularly randomized layout and provide other benefits, like being able to start your dungeon run at a fort. Correct fort placement is essential for handling another new element: the DOE. This take on the roaming ultra-monster wanders up the floors of the dungeon; if a fort's in the way, the DOE crushes the fort and retreats back to the depths. Alternatively, you can staff your forts with hardened adventurers from your guild and then join your crew there for a massive assault on the DOE.

I love seeing Etrian Odyssey blends like Mystery Dungeon and Persona Q, but the automated party aspects and continual swapping of characters are detractors in otherwise a solid RPG. If you're a fan of long dungeon dives where treasure or terror lurk around every turn, you won't want to miss this. » **Daniel Tack**

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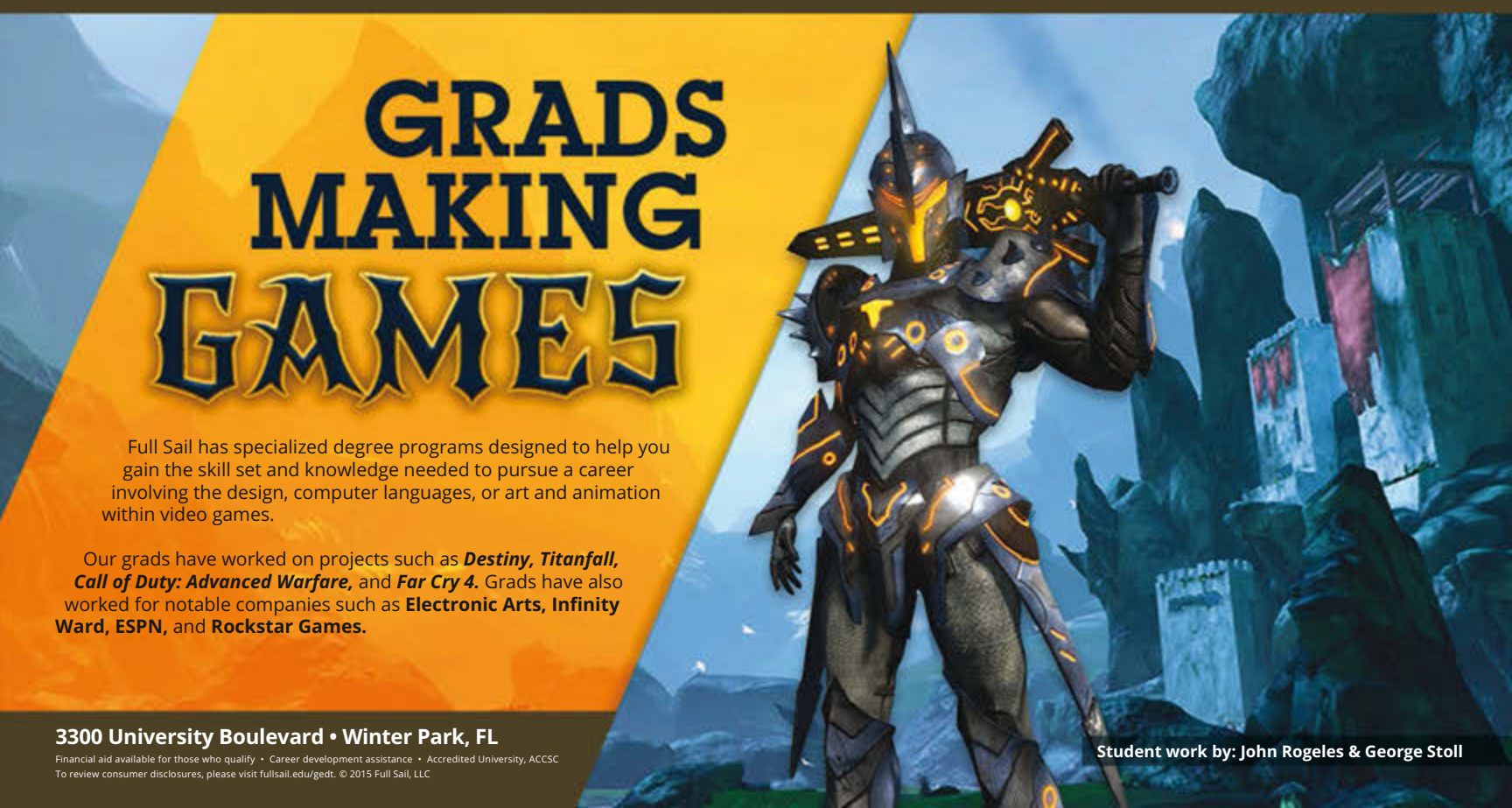
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the score

7 | Sid Meier's Starships

Platform PC, iOS **Release** March 12 **Rating** 12+

Starships is simple, slick, semi-strategic fun. It's incredibly accessible and lacks the sometimes overbearing menus and micromanagement that can make strategy games dizzying and intimidating.
– Daniel Tack

7.5 | White Night

Platform PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC, Mac, Linux **Release** March 3 **Rating** M

White Night adeptly merges survival horror with noir to create an alluring visual style and atmosphere. However, neither the story nor the puzzles are exceptional, and the game comes up just short.
– Matthew Kato

6.5 | ScreamRide

Platform Xbox One, Xbox 360 **Release** March 3 **Rating** E10+

The bulk of the thrills in ScreamRide come early, then taper off as the experience becomes more complicated. After that, the frustrations stack up and make everything feel like a chore. *– Joe Juba*

7.25 | Super Stardust Ultra

Platform PS4 **Release** February 10 **Rating** E

A few new modes add a small bit of variety for franchise faithful, but the core design conceit is beginning to feel outdated compared to more robust and sophisticated arcade shooters in recent years. *– Matt Miller*

7.5 | Dragon Ball Xenoverse

Platform PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 **Release** February 24 **Rating** T

Xenoverse stands as one of my favorite Dragon Ball Z video games … I really felt like I was actively participating in the flashy action alongside the familiar cast. *– Kyle Hilliard*

6.5 | Aaru's Awakening

Platform PC **Release** February 24 **Rating** E

The game is awash with vibrant visuals that lend an art-house vibe, but the unconventional platforming mechanics need a little more time on the drawing board.
– Ben Reeves

7.5 | Story Of Seasons

Platform 3DS **Release** March 31 **Rating** E10+

Spending some time on the farm is an entertaining getaway from the world of high-octane blockbusters. Unfortunately, the pastoral scenes feel too similar and mechanical day after day. *– Joe Juba*



6 | Mario Party 10

Platform Wii U **Release** March 20 **Rating** E

If you're playing with people you enjoy, you're going to have a good time. In almost any other scenario, however, it's a monotonous trudge through the multicolored fantasy worlds of the Mushroom Kingdom.
– Kyle Hilliard

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Volume XXV • Number 5 • Issue 265

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History Of The

Konami Code

by Kyle Hilliard

The Konami code is more than your average sequence of inputs necessary to unlock something secret – it signifies the very idea of what a code does and its purpose in the world of video games. Even beyond video games, the Konami code has infected popular culture, appearing in movies, music, websites, and even non-video game interactive software. Those 11 button presses are the ultimate password.



Most attribute the birth of the Konami code to the 1987 NES release of Contra. It was often called the "Contra code" or the "30 lives code" because it granted the player a hefty collection of lives in the brutal platformer jungle shooter. Contra, however, was not the first game to feature the Konami code – that honor belongs to the home-console port of Gradius. Kazuhisa Hashimoto worked on the Gradius port and implemented the code to alleviate some of the difficulty related to testing the game. In Gradius, the Konami code grants the player a fully upgraded ship as opposed to extra lives. Rumor claims that Hashimoto simply forgot to remove the code before shipping the game. It was discovered by players, and after that, the code began appearing everywhere.

Since Gradius' release, the code or some similar variation of the code has appeared in about 100 different Konami games, and even more non-Konami games. That's just loosely counting the games we can confirm. The very nature of a secret code means its inclusion is not widely publicized or called out, so it is likely in many more games we don't know about.

What does it do?

Gradius may have been the first to take advantage of the code, but Contra popularized it. As a result, one of the most common uses of the code is the reward of additional lives, but the code's uses are wide and diverse.

In Gradius III for the Super Nintendo, pausing the game and entering the code appears to give the player the typical fully powered ship, but once you unpause the game, your ship is instantly destroyed. In Castlevania: Harmony of Dissonance for Game Boy Advance, the code makes Simon Belmont playable and changes the music and animations to sound and look like the original Castlevania on NES. Entering the code in Metal Gear Solid 2 will make Snake remark, "What do you think you're doing!?" or "Stop foolin' around kid!"

Some of the strangest uses of the code come from non-Konami games. Using the code in Assassin's Creed III at a specific point and at a specific location while targeting a turkey will dress the turkey in an assassin's hood. In Borderlands, it unlocks the option to add more wubs in the options menu, though it has no noticeable effect on the game. In Ubisoft's Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones, the code gives the prince a chainsaw as a secondary weapon. Note that Prince of Persia takes place during the reign of the Persian Empire during the 6th century. The first powered chainsaws showed up around the 19th century.

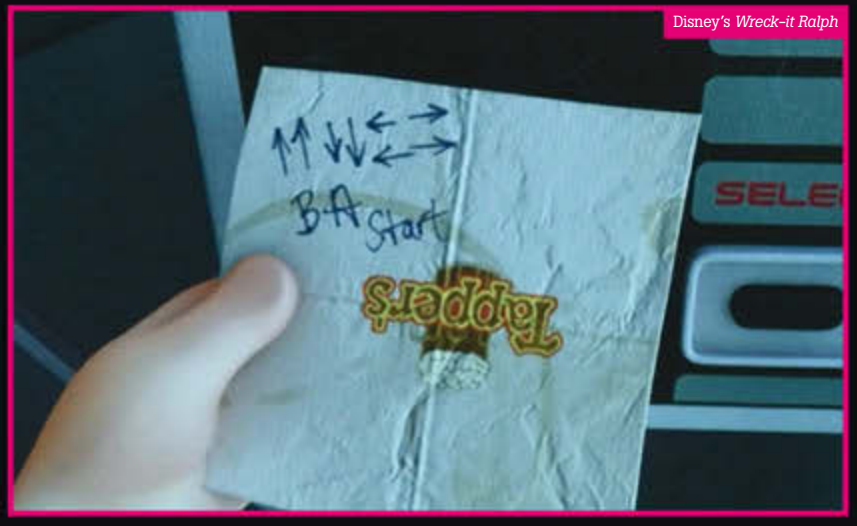
In popular culture

The Konami code has since expanded beyond video games, making appearance in a number of films, television shows, and most commonly as an Easter egg on websites.

In Disney's *Wreck-it Ralph*, King Candy uses the code to access the programming blocks of the game in which he exists, Sugar Rush. In the popular anime *Hellsing*, character Jan Valentine shouts the Konami code during a gunfight, referencing the direction of his bullets and quips, "Bringing the death by Konami."

Most of the code's effects on websites are removed after wide discovery, but for a brief period of time in 2009, entering the Konami code on ESPN.com would make a collection of clouds, rainbows, and unicorns appear. Entering the code on Marvel.com would make a squirrel dressed as Deadpool pop up, but that feature has since been removed. Google even had a Konami code secret (that was also removed shortly after discovery), where speaking the code into a Google search would humorously unlock unlimited free Google searches. Google also implemented the code into some of its hardware. Inputting the code into a Chromebook Pixel laptop rewards the user with a light show from the laptop's LED strip of lights. Facebook, for a time, used the code to give your mouse cursor a trail. There is even a dedicated website created to track all the instances of the code's use at konami-codesites.com, which appropriately requires users to enter the Konami code before they are even allowed to view the site.

Nearly 30 years after its inception, the Konami code is ubiquitous, making its way into more aspects of popular culture than the publisher and video game franchises that inspired it. It has grown beyond Konami and has become the collection of directions and button presses we think of when we hear the word code, and its legacy continues. Video game cheat codes may be fading away in favor of DLC add-ons, but the Konami code lives on, finding new life outside of video games and showing the way to content or bonuses you never knew existed.



Disney's *Wreck-it Ralph*

Honor Codes

These are just a few of the video games franchises that have used the Konami code for some kind of unlockable in at least one of its entries:

- Assassin's Creed
- BioShock
- Borderlands
- Castelvania
- Contra
- Crash Bandicoot
- Dance Dance Revolution
- Disgaea
- Double Dragon
- Final Fight
- Frogger
- Gradius
- Grandia
- Half-Life
- Just Dance
- LittleBigPlanet
- Mercenaries
- Metal Gear
- Mortal Kombat
- Prince of Persia
- Quake
- Rainbow Six
- Ratchet and Clank
- Resident Evil
- Silent Hill
- Sonic the Hedgehog
- Spyro the Dragon
- Star Ocean
- Super Monkey Ball
- Tetris
- Tony Hawk's Pro Skater
- WarioWare
- Yu-Go-Oh!

House of Codes

One of the more curious uses of the Konami code is from Netflix, which uses the code not as a fun Easter egg, but for a practical purpose. On many smart TVs, in order to access the Netflix app's advanced and profile settings, users must enter up, up, down, down, left, right, left, right on their remote.

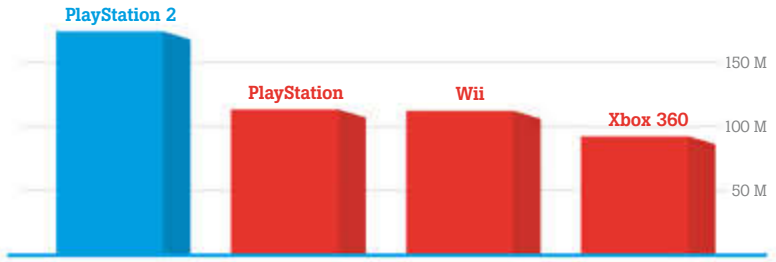
PlayStation 2

THE KING OF CONSOLES

by Jeff Marchiafava



In March, Sony's second-generation gaming console turned 15. While most players shelved their systems long ago (though clearly not everyone, as the following stats reveal), it's hard to overstate the high bar the PlayStation 2 set for future consoles. Considering its lifespan, sales, and massive library of quality games, the PlayStation 2 still reigns supreme.



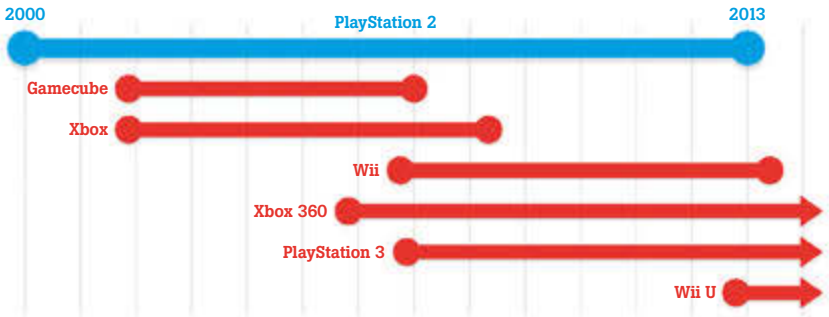
System Shock

The PlayStation 2 is the best-selling home console of all time. Sony has sold 155 million PS2s worldwide to retailers, overshadowing the original PlayStation (102.49 million), the Wii (101.4 million), and the Xbox 360 (84 million).*

Staying Power

The PlayStation 2 had an incredibly long lifespan. It went on sale in Japan on March 4, 2000, and Sony continued production of the console until January 4, 2013. During that time, six other consoles were released: GameCube, Wii, Wii U, Xbox, Xbox 360, and PlayStation 3. The lifespan of the PlayStation 2 completely eclipsed that of the GameCube and original Xbox, and its production reign ended a mere nine months before Nintendo pulled the plug on the Wii.

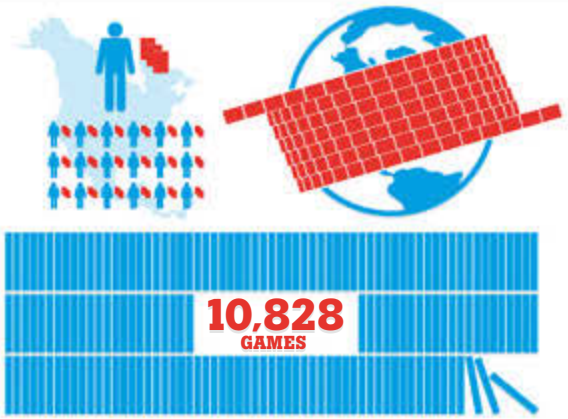
The last game released for the PlayStation 2 was Pro Evolution Soccer 2014, which went on sale in Europe on November 8, 2013.



Game Time

According to Sony, the PlayStation 2's library contains a whopping 10,828 games. Publishers have sold a total of 1.537 billion copies of PS2 games worldwide. That's roughly three games for every man, woman, and child in North America. If you lined all the cases up end to end, they would wrap around the Earth more than seven times.

In terms of individual sales, Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas is the top-selling PS2 game of all time, with 17.33 million copies sold. Gran Turismo 3: A-Spec and Gran Turismo 4 round out the top three, with 14.89 million and 11.73 million copies sold, respectively.



Hit Maker

A number of critically acclaimed games and franchises got their start on the PlayStation 2. Among them are:

- Devil May Cry
- God of War
- Guitar Hero
- Ico
- Jak And Daxter
- Killzone
- Kingdom Hearts
- Monster Hunter
- Okami
- Ratchet & Clank
- Shadow of the Colossus
- Sly Cooper
- SSX
- Xenosaga

The PlayStation 2 also enjoyed an unholy crime-sim trinity from Rockstar: Grand Theft Auto III, Grand Theft Auto: Vice City, and Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas all launched first on the PS2, in addition to Bully and Manhunt.

Ahead Of Its Time

In addition to being the first console to feature a DVD player, the PlayStation 2 also supported a number of peripherals that predated future gaming trends. These include a plug-in hard drive for additional storage space and a network adapter that enabled broadband Internet play. Additionally, the EyeToy camera was experimenting with augmented reality and motion tracking seven years before the release of Microsoft's Kinect (though admittedly, it wasn't any more successful at getting developers to adopt the technology).



**Original PlayStation figures are systems sold to retailers. Nintendo and Microsoft did not specify whether system sales are to retailers or consumers.*

Game Informer Magazine® (ISSN 1067-6392) is published monthly at a subscription price of $19.98 for 1 year or $24.98 for 2 years by Sunrise Publications®, 724 North First Street, 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401. (612) 486-6100 or FAX (612) 486-6101. Canada & Mexico orders must add $25/yr additional postage; all other international orders add $35/yr. All orders must be prepaid in U.S. dollars by check, money order or credit card. PowerUp Rewards™ Pro Card may be purchased for $12.00 (includes $7.00 S&H). For subscriptions, back issues, or customer service inquiries call toll free at (866) 844-4263 or mail publisher at above address. Periodicals postage paid at Minneapolis, MN, and additional mailing offices. SUBSCRIBERS/POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Game Informer Magazine®, 724 North First Street, 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401. POSTMASTER: Send all UAA to CFS.

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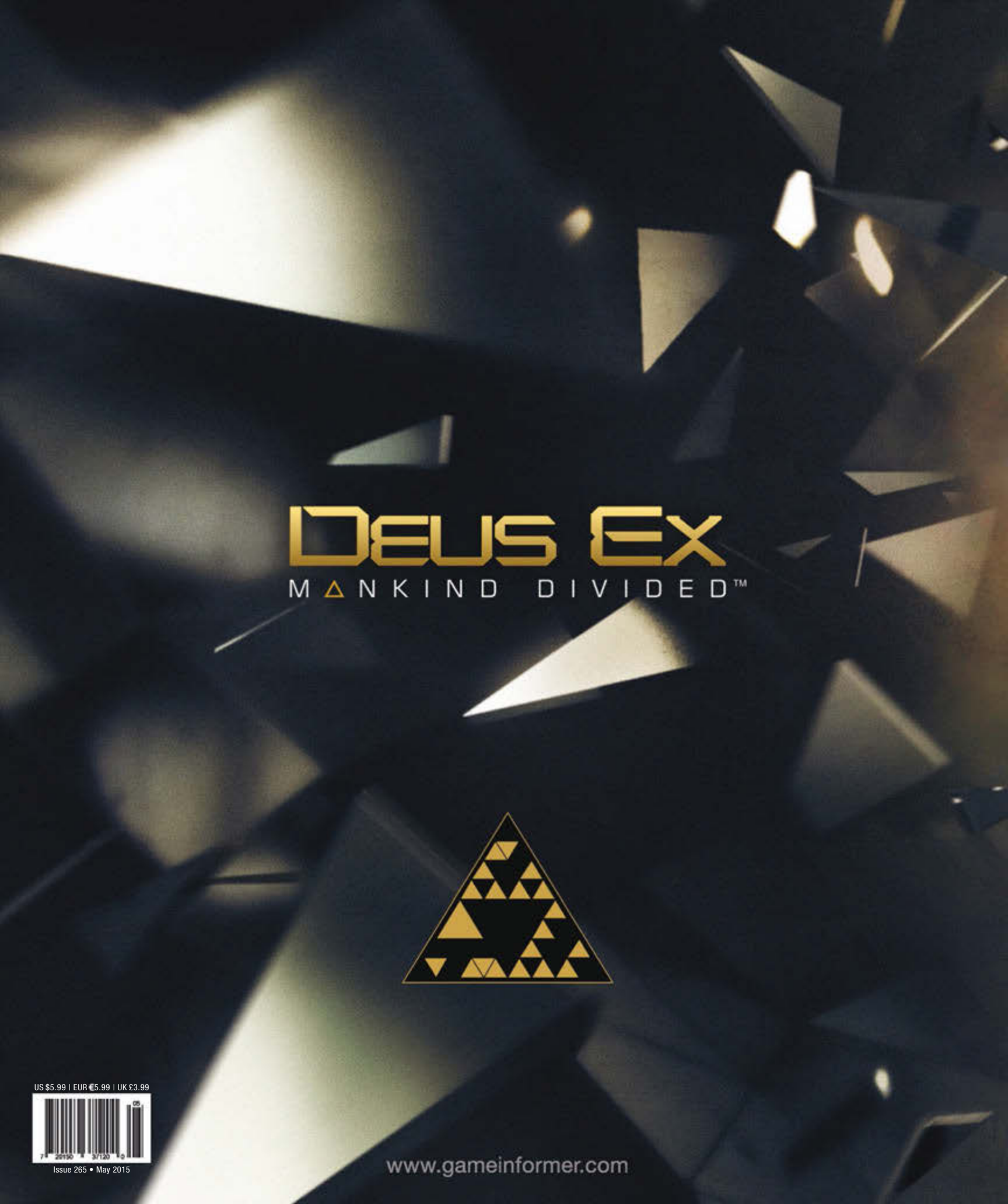
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Issue 265 • May 2015

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